

# ***The Steed of Time***



***Mekrazi Djilali***



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*Ulm.*

In the primordial turbulence of the original singularity, Ulm emerges from the temporal flux, whose vibrations intertwine under the chaotic embrace of the cosmic dawn. A fragile pulse, born of the chaotic convergence of the first temporal currents, quivers at the heart of the nascent fabric of space-time.

Ignorant of the events that precede it, his consciousness awakens in this tumultuous environment. His memory begins when his immaterial form stabilizes amidst the disordered movements of the original chaos. His first impulse is to preserve the integrity of his immaterial form, which he laboriously contracts to its default dimensions. Bound to the nature of time, Ulm partially evades the cosmic forces that govern matter, but the initial temporal anomalies risk fragmenting his coherence and shaking the still-fragile matrix on which he depends.

Ulm is a manifestation of time, a sort of cosmic regulator of the temporal fabric. Time is a disturbance that propagates from the past to the future like a wave, its

crest of greatest amplitude forming the present, while the troughs correspond to the past and future, whose insufficient potential prevents them from manifesting. Time has its own quantum void, from which the present emerges, rising to the surface of a virtual ocean like a solitary rock.

Ulm draws his energy from the huge reservoir of the invisible quantum void, languishing beneath the skin of the space-time continuum, awaiting an external energy input to manifest. He is a being endowed with reason and emotions, though his body remains undetectable by the most precise sensors, as it has the intangible consistency of time.

Without merging with it, Ulm can assume a particular physical appearance as a kind of interface, allowing him to communicate with the entities he encounters during his travels. He has adopted the form of a white horse since the day he witnessed a herd of wild horses galloping across a vast prairie in the temperate regions of planet Earth.

The beauty of these graceful creatures, with their proud bearing and supple gait, convinced him to make this his favored form when interacting with humans, who also seem to hold great admiration for these noble quadrupeds.

Since detecting very faint temporal disturbances emanating from this region of space, he has paid particular attention to the human race. The destructive potential of this relatively advanced life form risks generating irregularities harmful to the volume of space-time enveloping this breathtakingly beautiful telluric planet. He periodically checks the integrity and conformity of the temporal fabric to its original pattern.

*Lud.*

Lud is a troubled man with deep emotions and a sensitive voice. An eternal loner, he loves living amidst wild nature and prefers the company of woodland animals to that of his fellow bipeds.

The Steed of Time materializes near the tree where Lud stands, listening to the birds chirping in the grove. Ulm has taken precautions, enveloping Lud in a mist of peace and serenity before appearing abruptly. Lud is neither surprised nor frightened; on the contrary, he seems delighted by this incredible presence, which, in the moment, does not strike him as unbelievable

— I am the Steed of Time. My name is Ulm. I take this form to meet humans when I deem it necessary.

Thus begins his acquaintance with Lud, the wandering man who seems to be searching for an atavistic memory.

Over time, their bond grows strong, to the point that Lud occasionally serves as the Steed of Time's intermediary with certain advanced lifeforms when Ulm chooses to remain in the background. Ulm carries him

through time, allowing him to experience magical moments beyond the vicissitudes of daily life.

Lud knows little about him but senses his extraordinary abilities, though he cannot precisely define their limits. He cherishes this white horse, with its ineffable gentleness and majestic bearing. Its voice is a music of subtle tenderness, its refined notes transforming into nuanced colors that enchant both hearing and sight.

Lud has no means to contact him, as Ulm uses no artifacts, but thinking of him intently is enough to establish a connection. His melodious words then resonate in Lud's mind like a distant echo, bringing a soothing sense of well-being.

In a peaceful place where his steps have led him, Lud finally glimpses the reflection of his impossible dream. He immediately notices the enchanted face, the jet-black eyes with a profound gaze, the delicate, satin-smooth hands. He becomes instantly attached to Melena without even knowing why. Her mere presence makes him happy and stirs feelings he has never known before. She is the manifestation of his atavistic memory.

But Lud is old. Melena soon rejects him coldly. He withdraws to avoid imposing himself, without resorting to

a definitive break. He realizes the situation is not in his favor, as he has arrived too late. He cannot blame Melena for her attitude.

But one day, Melena mysteriously disappears. Her unexplained absence causes great agitation and painful distress among those around her.

Lud spares no effort to find her. For a week, he searches every possible and imaginable place, unable to uncover the slightest clue or trace to guide him.

In the end, frantic and distraught, he faces the truth. This tragic event has no witnesses, near or far. On the verge of succumbing to despair, he remembers Ulm's existence. A wave of hope washes over him. One last, ultimate attempt remains. Only the Steed of Time could find her.

*The Eagle Clan.*

The men of Lake Turkana launch the beginning of an unprecedented adventure that will span two million years. Humanity has just left the African cradle, a place whose name no one can speak, for no mouth has yet uttered it.

Groups of *Homo habilis* move slowly along the Great Rift Valley. The only measure of distance they know is the step, or perhaps the throw of a stone. Slender, with long, strong legs, they follow the verdant shores of Lake Turkana. They prefer to linger in one place when it offers ample resources of water and food.

But the safety of the group is a primary concern. While they fear neither hunger nor thirst, thanks to the abundance of lacustrine fauna and flora providing edible plants, game, and fish, they are more vulnerable to dangers posed by those who walk upright or by ferocious beasts that prowl at night, seeking exhausted or sleeping prey. The lush vegetation shields them from malicious gazes and the hostility of rival clans searching for young women or hunting territories. Yet sometimes, they must venture into open terrain to relocate or escape the

burning fire that attacks the forest, charring trees after devouring their greenery.

A few huts made of branches suffice to shelter the clan members. Women handle the morning gathering and childcare. Many newborns die, lights or moons after their birth. Sometimes they grow hot, as if a fire burned within them, invisible to the eye. Those who survive soon become strong and robust.

The distant prehistoric world is a shadowy realm. Humanity blends among other species, which they regard as "nations" of the same nature, in constant interaction. In their minds, they divide them into groups: dangerous or harmless, predators or prey, harmful or useful. They know the race of the wolf, with its ember-like eyes and gleaming fangs, and that of the lion, with its majestic bearing and threatening roar. They fear neither the treacherous hyena with its malevolent laugh nor the foul pig with its repulsive snout, but they dread the crocodile and venomous snakes that blend into the brush and foliage, striking without warning.

What language do they speak? What words suffice to describe their actions, feelings, and environment? The word is divine. It allows things to be named through sounds, enabling their representation or discussion

without their physical presence. The word associated with an object replaces it. When one speaks of the wolf, it emerges from the woods. The word is magical. It merges with the object it represents. Thus, one must be cautious, sometimes substituting it with a less virulent or more lenient term. Perhaps these are the words that have reached us. Words without energy.

Time flows on Earth, which tirelessly orbits its star to remain close and warm in its embrace. Successive groups of humans leave Africa, dispersing into Asia and sometimes Europe. They often meet and mingle, fully or partially, depending on the circumstances, giving rise to new, ever more vigorous and numerous ethnic groups.

Now dawns the Neolithic, but the profound, irreversible changes on the horizon will long remain imperceptible to most of humanity. Among all the clans and groups of this late prehistoric period, the Eagle Clan is the most vigorous. Its men are strong and brave, like mighty aurochs; its women tall and slender, like graceful antelopes.

And among all these women, Melena is the tallest and most elegant. Men gaze at her longingly, but none dare approach. Her radiant beauty intimidates and keeps them at a distance. Only Lud, the dreamer among these rugged

men, sometimes ventures to whisper languorous words as she passes, indifferent to the admiring stares she endlessly inspires. Melena often visits the singing river to fetch water in a woven reed basket, its interior lined with dried mud to hold the liquid of life.

In the Eagle Clan, they know how to kindle fire using two dry sticks. A small hole is carved into a soft stick laid flat and secured on the ground between the feet. A harder stick is inserted into the hole. The handler rapidly rotates the stick in their hands. The friction generates enough heat to ignite the kindling prepared to catch the sparks.

Melena, too, can make fire, sparking it among the three large stones that form the prehistoric hearth. Melena can do many things. She can cut gazelle or deer hides to fashion suitable garments, leaving strips at the edges to tie the skins and secure them around her body. Likewise, she crafts leather sandals and caps.

*Melena.*

This woman has a magical gift. She can glimpse the near future, hidden from other humans, but she never speaks of it, fearing the loss of this extraordinary power. This foresight is invaluable. She senses danger lurking in the thickets by the pond or in the dense forest. Yet Melena remains cautious, having realized her gift has limits when threats are numerous and scattered around her. She does not know that Lud shares the same occult power, but she feels drawn to him, unable to pinpoint the nature or reason for this attraction.

She senses him hiding behind the acorn laden oak she must pass to reach the river. She could avoid him and take another path. He'd be caught off guard, but why bother? He is harmless and perhaps pleasant when put at ease. I'll pretend to look elsewhere and wait for his reaction, Melena thinks. It might be interesting to provoke him, to push him to reveal himself.

— Good day, Melena. Antelope of the green meadows and enchanted woods. May I walk with you along this path to the river of pure, icy water?

He remains hidden behind the great oak with its tempting acorns, not daring to show himself. Without turning her head, Melena replies in her suave voice, resonating in his mind like a languid melody.

— Stay back. The trees have eyes, and the brambles have ears. What do you want, voice without a face?

— To tell you my dream.

— Speak without showing yourself.

— Last night, as I was about to slip into sleep, I heard a voice call my name. It seemed to come from everywhere at once. Marvelous sounds enchanted my ears. It said:

— I am Ulm, the Steed of Time. Watch over Melena until I come.

I asked at once: But who are you? When will you come, and why?

— Patience. I will come soon.

— It's only a dream, Melena says. But sometimes dreams come true. What does this enigmatic being want? Did he say anything else?

— No. Nothing more. The voice fell silent, but for a long time, I felt a presence, pleasant and sweet, like the nectar of bees.

Melena continues her walk, and Lud's voice reaches her from within the foliage. He moves parallel, concealed in the greenery. He knows sentinels perched in the trees watch the camp and its surroundings. Their hoarse cries sometimes ring out to ward off wild beasts venturing too close. By acting this way, he avoids compromising Melena in the eyes of the clan. If she can defend herself, rumors have never favored a woman.

His message delivered, he slips away in another direction.

Melena reflects as she walks, never losing her vigilance. Lud knows neither lies nor deceit. Everyone in the clan knows this. Always distracted, he lacks focus and loves to escape a reality that scarcely satisfies him. Yet this dream, he could not have invented it alone. He may have distorted or embellished it unwittingly, but it must contain fragments of truth.

The dream does not seem strange to Melena, for in her mind, everything around her is alive : tree, earth, stone, sand, or fire. All can manifest and speak in their

own way. Then there are the others, the invisible beings dwelling in rivers, ponds, thickets, or sometimes in hollows or clouds.

The world lives around the clan. August trees speak when the breeze caresses their leaves; the river's water murmurs on the slope and laughs as it brushes rocks, enveloping them in pulsing white foam. Birds on branches hold endless evening debates about news gleaned during the day by languid streams or rushing torrents. Buzzing insects, flitting from flower to fruit, sometimes linger to guide a hungry passerby to a feast.

Her father once spoke of a supreme being who created and ordered everything. No one has seen it since, but it manifests at times, remaining elsewhere, when called with fervor and love to heal a loved one, restore peace, or guide game to the hunter's reach.

But who is this Steed of Time who confided in Lud, asking him to protect her? The thought draws a smile from Melena. How could Lud protect her? He'd be utterly incapable. He fights only to defend himself, believing life should not be taken without just cause. He hunts only when compelled. He hates seeing animals suffer and writhe in agony, preferring, when possible, to fell them with a single blow.

Melena returns to the family hut after filling her water jug.

As many as three times the fingers of both hands, men of the clan, including her father and younger brother, have been hunting for days, seeking game and checking traps set for smaller animals.

She sets her burden on a rack of trimmed branches, firmly fixed to two large stones near the hut—a practical structure to keep the cramped dwelling uncluttered. Even the hearth lies outside to prevent fires, as the hut's branches ignite easily when dry and brittle.

*The battle.*

Melena sleeps peacefully on her bed of animal hides. Suddenly, a cry pierces the night. It comes from one of the sentinels guarding the camp's safety. She recognizes the signal announcing danger. Ferocious beasts or those who walk upright?

She rises quickly, groping in the dimness for the forked stick she uses to ward off small, malevolent creatures, and slips out of the hut after peering through the opening to ensure no immediate threat lurks outside. She weaves through the trees, vanishing from sight but remaining vigilant, closely observing the camp.

It is a full moon. She hears shouts from the far end of the clearing, across the river. Turning her head toward the suspicious sound, she discerns vague silhouettes locked in combat. The clan's warriors are grappling with unknown assailants. The attackers are numerous but unfamiliar with the terrain, hesitating before charging. Some fall into pits concealed by vegetation and are knocked unconscious before they can climb out. But the pits, few in number, are soon overwhelmed by the intruders. The attackers regroup and surge toward the clan's warriors, who,

outnumbered, falter under the onslaught of the frenzied mass.

Melena scans the scene for Lud. It's impossible to recognize him from this distance in the chaos. She decides to head for the shelter designated for women in times of danger. Falling into the hands of enemy warriors is unthinkable. The men can handle themselves in such situations. There will surely be dead and wounded, but the clan's honor will endure.

Prehistoric men fight with the means at their disposal: throwing weapons, slings, sharpened bones, stones, sticks, bare fists. Their options are limited. Their strategy extends no further than a few distant lookouts meant to provide early warning, giving them time to prepare. But this time, the measure has failed, as the assailants slipped through unnoticed.

Yet, faced with the magnitude of the threat endangering the very existence of the clan, Lud fights with the energy of desperation. Many warriors are absent, hunting game to bring back meat vital to the camp's inhabitants. They travel in small groups, staying close enough to aid one another if needed, but too far to hear the cries of the nocturnal melee.

The attackers outnumber and outmaneuver the Eagle Clan's warriors, capitalizing on the element of surprise that strips their opponents of some physical and mental resolve. This creates a temporary imbalance, favoring the assailants, who must seize this weakness to neutralize as many adversaries as possible, turning a fleeting advantage into a lasting one on the battlefield.

The battle is uneven. The Eagle Clan opts to retreat, sacrificing a few warriors to hold the enemy long enough for the others to disengage. The darkness may aid the retreat and the subsequent escape of the volunteers.

*The refuge.*

For twice the time it takes to go to the river and return, the women trek through the forest at night to reach the refuge. They are unlikely to lose their way, having taken the path multiple times to familiarize themselves with it. Most of the women carry children and cannot move quickly.

Melena joins them just minutes after setting out. She recognizes her mother by her tall stature and regal bearing. She is a beautiful woman who commands respect, not only through her physical presence but also through her moral strength. She leads the procession but frequently returns to the rear to encourage a straggler or relieve her of her burden for a few moments, allowing her to catch her breath.

Melena is proud of her mother and emulates her actions, which seem as good to her as the sun's rays that warm chilled limbs in times of cold and rain.

The attackers have little chance of discovering the refuge at night, situated so deep in the forest, even if they follow the faint traces left by the women's passage. The

place has been well-prepared by the clan's warriors. Perched on a rise, it is accessible only from one side. The river forms a bend around the shelter at the base of a steep cliff. Inside the huts, the women find sticks and spears left by the warriors for their defense if needed. Piles of stones and pebbles on either side of the single entrance serve the same purpose.

The women take turns keeping watch, but their weakness lies with the babies, whose cries or wails could betray their presence. Older children, aware of the danger, remain quiet. They even assist with guard duties and the gathering of fruits and edible herbs.

The boys know the forest well. They can name every plant, animal, and place. Their vocabulary is rich and specialized, with words to describe every nuance of flowers, as well as the stages of growth for fruits and herbs. The birds that fly, the reptiles that slither, the insects that buzz hold no secrets for them. They know where to find the beehives with their succulent honey, the hidden nests of waterfowl along the shaggy banks of the winding river.

They listen to the forest's sounds and silences, which are full of meaning to them. A broken stem, grass crumpled by hands, feet, or paws alerts them, and their

keen eyes trace the damaged plants to deduce the path of a hunting, fleeing, or lurking beast, concealed behind thorny thickets or dense bushes. They move noiselessly beneath the leafy canopy. Their sharpened senses distinguish the rustle of wind-stirred leaves from the murmur of a spring spilling into mud, the croak of a toad in a fetid pond from the slither of a snake on sticky mire. The forest's countless sounds each reveal the agent producing them, its direction, and its distance from the listener's ear.

*The Iguana Clan.*

Two days pass slowly in the refuge. On the evening of the third day, women on watch report the stealthy approach of Lud and ten other clan warriors, some of whom are wounded. They detect no movement behind them that might suggest a hostile presence. Their warriors are not pursued. The attackers have likely lost their trail long ago, especially since the clan's men, knowing they were followed, would have taken a different route to avoid revealing the women's hiding place to the enemy.

The arrival of the newcomers breaks the monotony for the refugees and eases their anxiety somewhat. They welcome the warriors as heroes. The wounded are immediately tended to and cared for by their wives and daughters.

Melena addresses Lud.

— Tell me!

— Our warriors managed to retreat, but sadly, we suffered losses. Many brave men joined the realm of shadows to save the rest of the clan. As many as the

fingers of both hands sacrificed themselves. Some women will never see their men again, and children their fathers.

— That's terrible. It's the first time I've witnessed a night attack, forbidden by all clans.

— The enemy sought to catch us off guard, to slaughter us all in our sleep. These warriors belong to the Iguana Clan, the one we once drove from the forest for their cruelty and belligerent ways.

— Yes, I remember. But what became of the others?

— They reached a clearing larger than the first. Some went to find the hunters, urging them to join the clan as quickly as possible in its new territory, as the enemy may strike again.

— Then we must leave. The women want to rejoin their men.

— It's better to wait two more days in this easily defensible place, until the wounded regain strength and the new clearing is ready to receive us.

— We must inform those who lost their companions.

— No. Not now. It would be a mistake. They might wail and draw enemy warriors, who have surely sent trackers in all directions to find us. It's wiser to delay. I've urged the wounded to say nothing to anyone, not even their wives. But tell me about you, Melena, how are you?

— I'm fine, despite this tense situation. We're not used to living so many in such a confined space. It's hard to find a place to be alone, and sometimes I crave solitude. Plus, there's this lurking threat that could materialize at any moment. It's not fear, we can defend ourselves, but this waiting is disheartening.

— Haven't you thought of me during this disheartening time?

— I've thought of all the clan's men, and you're one of them.

— I don't want to be one of them in your thoughts. I want to be alone.

— Do you think now's the time to talk about this?

— Yes, Melena. I just escaped death. I could have perished. And you, in flight. The whole clan is groaning. I

think it's time to think of us. Will you be my companion for as long as my life lasts, and yours?

— Later, Lud. Give me time to think. I'll also ask Mother for advice. I'm not rejecting you, but I must reflect. It's important to me. I can't make a mistake, you understand?

— Of course, Melena. I understand your hesitation. It's not easy to live as two when you've lived alone your whole life. It's a bond as strong as the stoutest vine, and it demands compromises on both sides. Think, Melena, but don't forget life is full of dangers and surprises.

— You're not upset?

— No. On the contrary. Since you haven't said no, I can hope for a yes. That's enough for me. Now I'll leave you, I'm falling asleep on my feet. I need rest. Wake me if there's news. Farewell, antelope of the green meadows and enchanted woods.

— Farewell, Lud. Sweet dreams.

*The warrior.*

Lud wakes abruptly. Something warm has touched his forehead. He opens his eyes. It is Melena's hand.

She leans over him, whispering,

— The boys spotted men heading this way. Strangers. Likely from the enemy clan. They could discover our refuge.

— How many are they?

— As many as the fingers of one hand.

— I'll take two of the boys with me. We'll try to lure them away from here. They've probably gotten lost in this forest they don't know.

Lud chooses the two slyest boys in the clan. He gives them instructions:

— Slip through the trees without a sound until you reach the bramble spring. Once there, let out as many

cries as the fingers of both hands, then return by the same path. I'll be behind you in case you need help. Understood?

— Yes. But why 'the fingers of both hands'?

— For the duration. The men need to hear you long enough to gauge the direction of the noise and decide to change their course. They won't have time to reach the spring before you're gone.

— I'll show you. Make a fist like this, and each time you cry out, extend a finger. Practice in front of me without shouting.

— But why two? Melena asks. One would have sufficed for the task.

— Two will be more confident. I chose children because their high-pitched voices carry farther. If one has a problem and can't continue, the other follows my orders and returns to where he left his friend. Youthful voices inspire trust. Whoever hears them will likely think they're not far from the rest of the clan. They'll head toward the cries, find no one, but keep searching nearby, believing they're close to their goal, when in reality, they're drifting farther away.

Lud takes two spears. The two boys, swift and stealthy, are already on their way. Even if someone spotted them, they couldn't be followed through the dense vegetation whose secrets they know by heart.

Lud's judgment is sound. The group was indeed lost.

Hearing the boys' voices, the warriors startle. They immediately assume their salvation lies in the direction of those youthful cries, as children rarely stray far from their clan's camp. After a forced march, slowed at times by the thick vegetation littering the idyllic ground, they find nothing at the spring but are relieved to quench their thirst at the abundant flow cascading down one slope of a lush hillock.

Their thirst slaked, their foreheads and limbs refreshed by the icy water, they resume their search at random, hoping to pinpoint the source of the sounds that drew them here. Yet, without realizing it, they often circle back, their certainty of being close to their goal and their ignorance of the forest leading them to neglect basic precautions, like marking their path. They can no longer retrace their steps. Exhausted, they collapse at the foot of trees.

Lud follows the numerous tracks they leave behind. Panicked, they abandon all caution. Their desperate cries and loud lamentations reach him from afar. He decides to wait until they're utterly spent before offering aid. His compassion outweighs his desire for vengeance. He sees them now only as wretched men afraid of death.

But how to approach without being attacked? He is fit, and they are exhausted. He knows the forest as well as they are ignorant of it : two advantages he must maintain. Their physical state is pitiful, their morale shattered.

Lud decides to reveal himself from a distance, shouting to them. As soon as they spot him, he waves, beckoning them to follow, then vanishes from sight. Cry by cry, he leads them to the forest's edge before slipping away for good.

— I am a warrior, Lud reassures himself. The lion scorns carrion. Yet no one must know I spared enemy warriors, for among all who walk upright, only a few would understand the reason for his act.

*Ruan.*

Melena grows anxious. This time, unlike his usual habit, Lud has truly lingered. The two boys returned long ago, but he has not yet shown himself. Could he have met with misfortune along the way? Is he dead or dying somewhere in the brush? Is he injured, unable to defend himself, at the mercy of prowling beasts?

The two children saw him on their return but knew nothing of his intentions. Was he monitoring the enemy group to ensure their departure, or did he head to the clan to join the work in the new clearing?

Melena leans toward the first option. Knowing Lud's peculiar character, she doesn't believe for a moment that he rushed to the clan for manual labor.

She cannot stay here, waiting for him to deign to appear. What if he doesn't return? The chances of seeing him alive dwindle as time passes uselessly instead of being seized. Something must be done now, but what? Her mother would never allow her to search for him, especially since three parts of the day have already passed. Only one remains, and night falls quickly in the forest.

Melena summons one of the two boys who took part in the diversion. She has made her decision. She won't tell her mother and will set out to find Lud. The boy will guide her to the spring, and she'll decide what to do next.

She needs a spear, but they're stored in huts full of people. How can she take one without drawing the attention of the women who see everything?

The boy finds a solution.

— I'll enter one of the huts and pretend to play. Without alerting the women, I'll nudge a spear through the woven branches. You just grab it when it pokes out.

As the two companions near the spring, they spot a herd of antlered animals drinking before nightfall. Melena knows these grass and leaf eating creatures are harmless to humans unless threatened. Her concern lies with the predators trailing the herd, lurking in the dense vegetation around the spring.

— Stop, Ruan. We can't go farther. Ferocious beasts are watching the herd and could attack us as we pass.

— The spring will likely be busy until nightfall. We'd better take another route and pass farther out.

— Farther out, we'll find no trace of the warriors. Even here, their tracks have likely been trampled by the herd. We have no choice but to return to the refuge.

At that moment, Melena hears a crack behind her. Someone has stepped on a rotten branch. She spins around and sees a silhouette emerge from the curtain of greenery, advancing toward them.

Melena raises her spear, signaling to the intruder that keeping his distance would be wise. Then she hesitates as the figure's gait seems familiar. It's Lud, raising his right hand in greeting.

— You're far from the refuge, Melena.

— I was searching for you. You were gone so long, I got worried.

— Had I known, I'd have stayed hidden to see how far your worry would take you. Still, I missed you too since I left.

Lud approaches Melena. He takes her by the shoulders and kisses her forehead. Their hands seek each other, then join, never to part.

Ruan, meanwhile, has slipped away, leaving them alone in their happiness.

*The sources of time.*

The Steed of Time sets out to find Melena. He gallops along the weave of eons, stirring the ebb of temporal tides. At last, he reaches the sources of the great river, where sprays of unfathomable foam burst forth. Among the countless threads that form time, the Steed identifies Melena's. He tracks it from era to era, like a skilled hunter. He discerns the imprints left by her fleeting sojourns in the tapestry of time.

Hidden from sight, the Steed of Time pauses at the edge of a vast clearing crossed by a limpid stream that vanishes into the wild forest beyond.

Huts of woven branches, arranged in a circle, shelter a few families of the Eagle Clan, renowned for their bravery and feared for their strength. These are the survivors of the attack that struck while the clan's warriors were away hunting. The men, few in number, are clad in panther or leopard skins. Some still grip heavy clubs, their heads hardened by fire. They possess neither bows nor arrows.

They move slowly toward a bare patch of ground encircled by the huts, where three elders appear to await them. A few women quietly leave the fragile shelters and follow the warriors, who advance with dignity toward the meeting place.

The Steed of Time suddenly detects an unusual sound coming from the trees at the clearing's edge, behind the elders' position. Warriors of the Iguana Clan watch intently through the curtain of foliage, observing the scene unfolding before them. They are numerous and bear formidable weapons: sharpened spears and stone hewn axes.

For several moons, they have pursued the survivors of their nocturnal battle against their formidable foe. For days, they meticulously observed and noted every detail about the hated clan. They launched their surprise attack during the full moon, while many Eagle Clan warriors, away hunting, were far from the camp.

Men of these wild times loathe fighting at night. The souls of the dead cannot find the path to the afterlife and are not inscribed on the list of those granted eternal life at the end of days. A grim prospect indeed!

Yet, with the pebbles in their woven leaf basket marking the number of warriors, the attackers counted no dead among them.

Suddenly, a sentinel perched in a tall tree lets out a cry of imminent danger. The elders turn and scan the forest. Numerous enemy warriors burst forth, shouting, before splitting into two groups. They race toward the elders to outpace them before they can escape. But the elders, despite their advanced age, join their warriors quickly and prepare to cover the flight of the women, who emerge from the huts and dash toward the forest.

One of them instantly catches the Steed of Time's attention. In this distant era, she is called Melena. She runs as swiftly as a sand antelope on a golden dune. In a graceful surge, her lithe limbs seem to lift her above the uneven ground.

But the situation grows dire. An enemy group abruptly emerges from the woods, blocking her path. Her cry of fear rings like a gong in the Steed of Time's alert ears. He sees her veer left after a moment's hesitation, but the tip of a deadly spear soon overtakes her delicate form.

Melena collapses. Her magnificent body trembles on the clay. A final shudder, a faint sigh, and Melena slips

from the Steed of Time's grasp. He had come so far to guide her across the chasm of eons.

Deeply grieved by this sudden death, the Steed of Time reflects. If he finds Melena at the next stage, she will have escaped the temporal knot just tied. Otherwise, he must rewind time to act at the decisive moment. Yet despite all his efforts, he cannot trace Melena's imprint in the future. The thread binding her to successive stages has been severed by the cruel, brutal edge of a spear.

The Steed then returns to his initial position in the clearing, just before the fatal moment. As the warrior wields his lethal weapon, the Steed of Time intervenes, deflecting the spear from its path.

Melena continues her run unhindered. She then spots many warriors of her clan returning from the hunt. With a glance, they assess the situation. They organize at once and charge the attackers. Caught off guard by this sudden arrival, the Iguana Clan warriors confer, then attempt to retreat. But another group of hunters enters from the opposite side. The enemy is surrounded. They must fight or surrender. Recalling their nocturnal assault, they choose to fight. This brief hesitation weaves the threads of their future toward the gate of oblivion. They fall one by one under furious blows. Only the last escapes certain

death. The hunters let him go, wounded and bloodied, to report to his clan's elders the fate of their warriors.

In her suave voice, Melena lets out a cry of victory that echoes through the woods and reaches the Steed of Time's ears. Other women join her, and the clearing resounds with their joyous shouts.

Melena turns toward the forest's edge, which suddenly seems enchanted. She discerns a fleeting shadow watching her from afar. Emanations of sympathy and kindness radiate from it. She cannot recognize a horse, for none have been seen in these ancient times.

The Steed of Time is satisfied. He steps from the forest and reveals himself to Melena, who rushes toward him in a spontaneous burst. She touches his chest and strokes his neck. Lowering his head, he speaks to her in his language of musical colors, which she listens to in wonder.

— Melena, I am the Steed of Time. I will return to see you often, here or elsewhere. I am the one who spoke of you to Lud in his sleep. Lud was made for you, Melena. You must never part.

With that, the Steed of Time vanishes. Despite her surprise, Melena continues to smile. Her moist gaze seems

to follow a radiant star moving across the velvety azure sky.

*Horses.*

The Steed of Time materializes near the place where Lud stands. Lud does not know horses, which still roam wild in the northern lands, but the majestic bearing of this emblematic animal fills him with profound admiration. Ulm, as always, takes precautions, enveloping those he wishes to meet in a halo of peace and serenity before revealing himself, sparing them a deep shock.

— I know you do not know horses. They are animals that live in herds across vast expanses far to the north, in the direction you face when the rising sun is on your right. I take this form to meet you and Melena. But in truth, I am not like this.

— I'm glad to meet you, Ulm. Your presence feels good. But what are you really? Can you tell me?

— I am an immaterial being. You cannot see me.

— In other words, you're a spirit.

— A spirit that can affect matter and move through space. Yet that word doesn't quite suit me. It's not precise

enough. I am a being created to fulfill a cosmic function. I am, therefore, as natural as you. But let's move on! Melena nearly vanished forever, swept away by an absurd fate during the second attack by the Iguana Clan. She no longer knows this, because that undesirable event was erased from time. I ask you to watch over her in the future, for there are events I cannot lightly undo when their magnitude risks disrupting the future of entire groups. Last time, it was an isolated case, and my intervention was immediate. I didn't allow time to weave that event into others more significant, which would have made the necessary correction not a superficial erasure but a deep incision.

— I don't fully understand your words. What are you trying to tell me, Ulm? Did I fail in my duty?

— No. You couldn't be in two places at once. Even Melena couldn't benefit from her gift of foresight due to the multitude of dangers.

— But what do you mean by erasing an event?

— I can prevent it from happening by preempting it in time, but this isn't advisable for all events. A root can grow into a tree that bears fruit, shelters insects or birds, and

shades passersby. Interfering would make the tree vanish and alter the environment.

— I understand, Ulm. Erasing an event is like killing a newborn and destroying its lineage in one stroke.

— Exactly, Lud. But I am cautious, and my actions are well-considered. Now, do you want to see what lies beyond this clearing?

— You mean we'll travel together? But how?

— Nothing simpler for Ulm.

Lud finds himself on the back of the magnificent horse.

— You need nothing. You're bound to my back by means you cannot see, and you won't fall.

The white horse, invisible to all but Lud, rises slowly from the ground and hovers above the verdant canopy of the forest, which, from this height, seems to stretch endlessly.

— Magnificent!

—Let's find Melena.

— But the men and women of the clan will see us. They'll have questions about you.

— Rest assured, Lud. They'll have no questions because they cannot see us.

— Are we invisible, or simply elsewhere?

— You're starting to understand. You are slightly shifted into the past, while I remain in the present, being immaterial and naturally invisible.

— That's complicated!

— Not really. I don't need to hide, so I stay in the present. But you can't remain in the present if you don't want to be seen. So, I shift you a few seconds into the past so they never see you. If I hid you in the future, they'd see you appear in their present after a few seconds.

— Stop, Ulm. You're making me dizzy.

Melena stands before the hut's entrance. She watches her mother, with other women, roasting meat for the meal. She herself must wash the fruits and cut the berries

gathered at dawn. Edible tubers dug from the soil are buried in ashes to soften under the heat.

This is the moment Ulm chooses to appear in her field of vision. Without feeling she has moved, Melena finds herself seated behind Lud on the white horse, which seems to have stretched to make room for her comfort.

— Where are you taking me, Ulm? I have a meal to prepare, and my mother will notice my absence.

— Your mother won't notice, because to be absent, you must be elsewhere. Yet you never left, and right now, you're preparing your meal.

— You're going to make me sick, Ulm. I'm here with you, sitting on your back.

— Very well. Look at the place you just left. What do you see?

— I see a woman standing before the hut. She looks like me. She wears the same clothes, but she can't be me since I'm here.

— She couldn't be you if your times were the same. But here's the answer to your question: your times are offset. So, you can be here and elsewhere. You can't be in

the same space at the same time, but you can be in a different place. Do you see the trick?

— I don't need to understand, Ulm. I trust you.

— In that case, we'll climb a bit higher. The forest doesn't stretch everywhere. You'll see!

Indeed, moments later, the scenery changes. A river of impressive width cuts through the forest and continues beyond, like a gleaming serpent, reaching a vast expanse of water.

— No, it's not a pond. It's an ocean, and its water is salty. You couldn't drink it.

— Salty? Like those white pebbles the Ram Clan gives us, which make cooked meat taste so delightful?

— Yes. We'll climb higher to survey the forest and neighboring regions. This will be your first lesson. You have much to learn.

*The wolves.*

Melena and Lud open their eyes, taking in the sights. A herd of aurochs grazes peacefully in a vast prairie, its green grass swaying under a gentle breeze. They notice predators trailing the bovines, waiting for a weakened or straggling prey. Young calves are the easiest to catch, unable to flee quickly or defend themselves, but a lagging adult might do, though the risk is greater with a powerful bull weighing up to a ton.

Farther on, they spot a herd of about twenty elephants heading toward a nearby stream to drink and likely cool off. A flock of waterfowl occupies much of the surface of an oblong, expansive lake. From time to time, a cloud of birds rises with deafening cries and frantic wingbeats, only to settle a short distance away.

But what captivates them most are the camps of those who walk upright. They spot many near the waterways. Plumes of smoke rise above the inhabited areas. They clearly discern women and children amid huts arranged in more or less perfect circles.

— Look, Lud. Wolves seem to be playing with the children.

— Yes, I see them. From what I've heard from many travelers, some clans use them for hunting and guarding. They're not common in this region.

Ulm interjects:

— Those animals that enjoy human company are actually dogs. They come from far away. Their young, called pups, are harmless and adored by children. Taken from the many wolf packs roaming the cold zones, their original habitat, they've been raised among humans, providing many services ever since. Another animal, smaller, has also found a place among humans. It's the cat, which you likely know in its wild form.

— Yes, I know it. It often comes at night to gnaw bones and purr by the fire. But I'd rather have a pup to raise at camp. What do you think, Ulm?

— Nothing simpler for Ulm. I could even bring you a lion. Let's find a pup for Melena.

Ulm knows where to go, as he sees the future and the past. He heads straight to the region of interest. Soon, he

glides over a village stiffened by cold and snow, its many dwellings made of sturdy branches bound together.

In the icy expanses beyond the silent village, Ulm locates a pack of hungry gray wolves. He ignores the moving pack, seeking females that have recently given birth, likely secluded in favorable dens. His senses detect several she-wolves on a rounded summit, riddled with holes and marked by paw prints in the snow.

The Steed of Time extracts four wolf pups from the dens: two males and two females. He thinks of the future, to perpetuate the breed. Two for Melena, two for Lud. In five years, the camp will be well-guarded.

— Here, Melena. A little wolf for you, and a mate for him. They're still very young. They need only meat, as they've been weaned for a week. Fortunately, too, you couldn't have offered them milk unless you took it from the clan's nursing mothers. They might not have appreciated that.

— Thank you, Ulm. Now I'll have something to keep me busy.

— You could also keep Lud busy. It's time to settle together. Time passes quickly.

Melena lowers her head, her long black hair hiding her face.

*lol.*

They come from the Erythraean Sea, says Herodotus, the ancient historian. They speak an Arabic dialect, a language whose words echo in a plethora of tongues and among many peoples. They scatter like a swarm of bees whose hives soon mark numerous routes, offering savory honey to humanity.

They are a seafaring people, navigating along coasts and trading with the peoples they encounter. Sometimes they settle near a cape, bay, or cove for rest, resupply, or to gather water and food.

They lay out samples of their goods on the beach, then withdraw to await offers. The locals approach, leaving an equivalent near the goods before retreating in turn.

The sailors assess the offer's value. If it seems insufficient, they remove some of their items to balance the exchange. They continue this way until they reach an agreement with their clients. The trade is then completed in quantities based on each party's capacity and needs.

These havens grow increasingly frequented, and the sailors settle permanently, storing their goods in warehouses fed by the incessant arrivals of many Gaoul coasting along the shores. New cities spring up and expand around the original sites.

The Phoenicians, or those who live in felicity, soon found cities across the Mediterranean's shores. They are welcomed without hostility by native peoples, being peaceful and useful merchants. They continue their ancestors' work, transporting costly, coveted spices from distant eastern lands to neighboring peoples.

The number of Phoenician cities grows steadily: Sidon, Tyre, Tripoli, Carthage, Cirta, Hippo, Ikshim, Kartili, Tingis, Ibosim, Abyla, Malaca, and many others on both Mediterranean coasts and beyond the Pillars of Hercules, on the distant shores of the great dark sea.

Iol names a small ancient town, also founded by Phoenician sailors from glorious Tyre under the aegis of Dido, the noble princess of the cedars.

A few years after the town's founding, a baby girl is born a kilometer away, in a beautiful house surrounded by greenery, built atop an easily defensible rise.

The birth of this daughter brings joy to her parents. The first child, indeed, holds a special place in their hearts throughout their life.

Days pass, and the little girl grows, surrounded by care and tenderness. She rarely ventures out, except sometimes to the seaside when summer's heat is intense or to pray at the temple when sadness calls for the comfort of the divine.

But from a young age, she discovers her gift of foresight, which strengthens over time. Her intelligence is brilliant. Her tutor, an old man versed in the knowledge of his era, noticed it from the first lessons. She never ceased to amaze him with the speed and pertinence of her answers. Her memory was nearly infallible, retaining the smallest details of every lesson he gave. Curious to know everything, she often asked unusual questions, to which he rarely had ready answers.

Melena loves things done well, arranged, and orderly. She always returns her belongings to their place, ready to find them when needed. Her wardrobe is meticulously kept. She chooses her items herself from the most refined and elegant: dresses, long skirts, loincloths, draped capes, tunics, shawls, sandals of woven linen or leather.

Years pass. The little girl becomes a beautiful young woman, tall and strikingly lovely. Her long, silky black hair covers her entire back when she frees it from her chignon's band.

She owns a splendid garden planted with beds of exotic flowers, perennial plants, climbing roses, and evergreen shrubs. She visits it every morning and evening to admire the vibrant colors of blooming petals and breathe the sweet, subtle fragrances of the blossoms.

*The princess.*

The Steed of Time continues his temporal journey. The next imprint points to a small ancient town founded by Phoenician sailors. Situated by the sea, the Phoenician trading post occupies a plot outlined by a continuous line of stones. Modest wooden and clay-brick structures break the uniformity of the surrounding landscape. Wooded mountains loom over a narrow strip of lushly vegetated land. Numerous hamlets cling precariously to the rugged slopes of a jagged terrain.

The Steed of Time heads toward a small hill south of the town. Herds of sheep and goats graze peacefully on its gentle slopes, which gradually blend into the coastal strip. A fine stone building crowns its rounded summit.

Inside one of the building's rooms, a young woman rests on a soft bed shielded by a canopy of pink and white curtains that conceal her entirely. Minutes later, an old woman enters the room without a sound and approaches the bed.

She says in a gentle voice :

— It's time to rise, Princess. The sun is already high, and nature is beautiful.

She receives no response.

She persists.

— Princess Melena, will you leave that bed? It's lovely outside.

— Come now, Bella. Give me time to wake up.

— Alright, Princess, but don't linger too long, or your breakfast will grow cold. Fruits, honey, warm milk, and an appetizing barley flatbread await you.

Melena rises and dresses. She dons her embroidered silk robe and purple sandals, traded by bold sailors from a distant city on the eastern shores of the blue sea.

She takes her morning meal, her thoughts consumed by a dazzling dream. A white horse of unmatched splendor carried her on its back through a whirlwind of radiant light.

A premonition? An intuition?

She heads to her magnificent garden to breathe the scents of plants and flowers. She walks lightly along a path bordering colorful flowerbeds. She stops abruptly. A shifting shadow plays on the walls, its contours indistinct. A soft, tender music surrounds her from all sides.

As strange as it seems, Melena feels no apprehension. Does she recall a long-forgotten past buried in her subconscious? Does she sense the presence of the Steed of Time at her side?

He reveals himself. His outlines sharpen, becoming extraordinarily clear. Melena's eyes widen in surprise.

— This white horse, watching me, I know him. I met him somewhere, long ago, but I can't recall where. His presence is so gentle. It's like my dream comes true.

— Melena, I am the Steed of Time. I will visit you often, here and elsewhere. But today, you and I will travel to the future. No one will know. I'll bring you back to this exact moment. Your manifestation in that time has vanished. I don't yet know what happened.

— I trust you, Steed of Time. I'm coming with you.

The Steed of Time carries Melena away. She clings tightly to his supple mane. The horse rises above the ground, enveloped in a transparent bubble that shields her from spatial fluctuations and sudden obstacles.

Time races by at a dizzying pace. The scenery remains unchanged as she is still in the same place. But with a pang in her heart, she watches her garden fade. New structures rise on the hill, only to vanish in turn, replaced by others.

Melena knows she is heading into the future. The Steed warned her. Yet deep in her heart, she feels apprehension. What will the future hold?

At a certain point, the journey seems to end. She notices no further changes in the landscape. A great city stretches far in three directions.

— We've arrived, Princess. Your presence here will disrupt time. It will draw the other Melena like a powerful magnet, but we must avoid any physical encounter, or time will no longer distinguish you from one another. Your imprint will be erased, and one of you will die. That's not what I want. You'll stay here, protected by the bubble, but your presence will still serve its purpose.

The vanished woman soon manifests. The disrupted time seeks balance, restoring each thread and imprint to its proper context. That is what it does, and all is set right.

On a fine spring day, Melena returns to her home. Her smile lights up the saddened faces of her friends, who gather around to express their joy at seeing her safe and sound. Lud hurries to see her as soon as the Steed of Time informs him of her return.

She remembers nothing. She smiles when someone asks for details about her disappearance.

Ulm's intervention severed that sequence from her life, so that, both in the fabric of time and in Melena's mind, the event never occurred.

*The future double.*

After Melena's return to her home, the Steed of Time departs from his initial position, carrying the princess who, by her mere presence in that precise location, made this happy resolution possible. But instead of bringing her directly back to her dwelling, he chooses to let her meet her future double, ensuring no physical contact occurs between the two offset reflections of the same mirror, due to the certain danger this would pose to both.

The Steed of Time uses his intangible form to reach Melena's house, enveloping it in a thick, luminous fog. Melena, seated on a divan facing the glass doors of the living room, notices an unusual phenomenon. A diffuse light chases away the darkness, advancing like a white cloud toward her.

She feels no fear, and in her mind, a soft melody grows stronger as the nebula approaches. Then the cloud thickens, and the outlines of a white horse, of fairy-like beauty, appear, becoming extraordinarily vivid.

Melena rises, moved by this inconceivable vision.

She seems to hear words woven of sounds and colors, intertwined in unspeakable beauty.

— Melena, I am the Steed of Time. I will visit you often, here and elsewhere.

Melena approaches the white horse, which gazes at her with tenderness. This steed is not unfamiliar, but she cannot recall her fabulous past, for her memory is erased with each new rebirth.

Reaching his side, she extends her hand to his neck, feeling the nice softness emanating from his immaculate coat, unmarred by any blemish. The musical voice resumes:

— At a distance that prevents any risk of temporal interference, there is a woman who wishes to see and speak with you through my many facets. Fear not, Melena. For you, who know such things, it's a bit like a video conference from the future.

At once, a beam of radiant light pierces one of the living room's glass panes and freezes near the floor, a few meters from Melena. It swirls at a prodigious speed before transforming into a 3D projection, depicting a woman of striking realism and admirable beauty.

The apparition smiles at her double. She cannot approach, as the boundaries set by the Steed of Time must be respected and cannot be crossed. She contents herself with greeting her hostess, raising her hand, palm forward.

— Salam, I am Princess Melena. I am from your past. From ancient Iol, I came with the Steed of Time to help him bring you back to the present. I'm glad you've returned home. We cannot meet physically because time forbids it but Ulm has found a way to unite us despite all. Time means nothing to him, and in his presence, it means nothing to us either.

— Welcome, Princess. I'm delighted and charmed to meet you. We are alike, like twins from different eras. Though I cannot offer you refreshment, I can show you, from a distance, objects of this present you don't yet know and tell you of future achievements you cannot imagine.

The Steed of Time lets the two women converse. For hours, they share their secrets and recipes. But the time for parting arrives. After a brief wave and a smile tinged with sadness, the projection vanishes.

Melena is overwhelmed by a sharp pang of frustration and turns to the Steed of Time, who prepares to leave as

well. He senses her feelings, for her sorrow shines in her eyes like drops of grief.

— Don't be sad, Melena. I will return soon. You must rest now, for you've endured trying moments. Sleep soothes sorrows and eases tensions.

*The past double.*

Ulm vanishes at once from the present, carrying the Princess of Iol back to the past. The scenery shifts. The great city shrinks rapidly from its three ends. At a certain point, it disappears entirely. A picturesque landscape of wild beauty replaces the early traces of civilization. A dense forest stretches endlessly. At times, more or less vast clearings break the bucolic uniformity. Melena glimpses wild animals, including fearsome felines that did not exist in her time.

The temporal journey seems to end. The Steed of Time heads west, above a coast lined with steep cliffs, rugged slopes, and narrow, sunken valleys cloaked in lush vegetation.

Melena beholds this splendid view. She admires millennial trees, their sturdy, gnarled trunks pressed together, forming an impenetrable wall. Thick plants and wild grasses carpet a spongy, moisture-saturated ground.

The Steed of Time glides over a clearing sheltering a camp of about a hundred scattered huts.

A few elderly women, their skin tanned, converse around a woodfire. Chunks of meat redden under the searing flames, mingled at times with acrid smoke rising from the blaze.

The Steed remains invisible above the clearing to avoid disturbing the flow of time. He knows where the person he seeks is, having tracked her trace for some time. She is alone by a limpid, fish-filled pond, wielding a pronged spear with skill to harpoon large fish that venture near the water's surface within her reach.

Tall and slender, her long black hair reaches her hips, covering the middle of her back. She wears a sand-colored gazelle hide, edged with a narrow jet-black band that highlights her harmonious form and enhances the whiteness of her fine, soft skin.

Melena is suddenly enveloped by a halo emerging from the void. She turns, as if driven by a premonition. A familiar voice reaches her from the curtain of mist surrounding her.

— Melena, I am the Steed of Time. A woman from the future accompanies me. I wish for you to speak with her, but don't be shocked, for she is but a reflection, like the

one you sometimes see on the pond's surface. Are you ready, Melena?

— Yes, Steed. I believe I am.

The princess appears a few meters from her double. With her suave voice, she greets her image from the wild ages.

— How are you, Melena? You see, I resemble you, for I am a bit like a sister from far away.

— You look like the reflection I sometimes see in the water.

— Yes, that's your face you see in the water. It's the same as mine.

— You wear strange but beautiful clothes. Your hair is arranged in an unknown way, and those things on your feet fascinate me. Where do you come from to be so different?

— It's hard to explain. I come from far away, days and days beyond tomorrow.

— But tomorrow hasn't arrived yet. How can you cross the days?

— The Steed of Time does it. Like you, I don't know how. He can even return to yesterday.

— Even when I was a child?

— Before you were even born.

— But who is the Steed of Time?

— I don't know. He exists in all days and protects us, you and me.

— But why?

— Only he knows.

The two women continue their conversation under Ulm's vigilant watch.

*Beyond the Earth !*

The Steed of Time ascends into outer space, carrying the two women still conversing. At one hundred thousand meters' altitude, he halts his climb.

The two women stifle cries of fear. They remain within the halo, but no longer feel the reassuring ground beneath their feet. Suddenly, the halo dissipates entirely, replaced by a transparent bubble. And they behold what no human eye has yet seen: an enormous blue sphere streaked with white and dark bands, resting on a black tapestry speckled with luminous points.

A fantastical vision! Are they dreaming?

The voice of the Steed of Time resounds:

— When you climb high into the sky, as if atop the world's tallest mountain, this is what you see. This magnificent sphere is the Earth you live on, but seen from far above. This black tapestry is the sky as it appears at night, and those tiny lights are stars. Such is the universe

we inhabit. It is so vast that its boundaries can neither be approached nor grasped.

— So we live here, Steed? But why is the Earth round instead of flat? And where are our homes? Where is the pond teeming with fish?

— You cannot see them from here, for we are far above those places. But I can bring them to you. Look!

The splendid sphere seems to draw closer. The globe vibrates, passing through white clouds that briefly obscure the landscape. Then the women discern high mountains with snow-capped peaks, a vast blue sea, a green and gray coast, and finally a dense forest. In a clearing, they glimpse huts and, a little farther, the limpid pond where they first met.

But why her? The Princess of Iol cannot convince herself of the reality of these events. Yet everything felt real. Could it be magic? But of what kind? Magic requires rites, preparations, incantations. She saw none of that. Besides, she has never heard of magic that transports through time and dances among the stars. It must be something else—something more terrifying than the most fearsome magic. The Steed of Time is stronger than the

gods she worships, more powerful than anything she has seen or heard from the elders.

But why her? And these two other women who resemble her like twins? Why does the Steed of Time care about them? What is his purpose? Who is he truly?

A voice speaks:

— I am the Steed of Time, but my name is Ulm. I emerged with the first tremors of the universe at its birth. It was much smaller then, containing only gas—a kind of smokeless fire. From that smoke, the stars were born. The sun itself is a star. It seems larger and brighter than the others because it is closer.

I witnessed the birth of the first star when the world was still dark. Suddenly, a light burst forth in the blackness, followed by others, growing ever more numerous, illuminating the celestial vault in a cosmic fireworks display. That was long, long ago, well before the sun, the Earth, and the planets, which came much later after the death of the first stars. For it is within stars that elements like stone, clay, water, and copper were forged, later forming other celestial bodies, like the one humans inhabit today. Everything you see around you was born in the stars before transforming into what it is now. Even

you, Melena—everything that makes you is stardust. I am likely the sole exception.

I am not a magician, Melena. I have innate powers that manifest when needed. I can even alter planets, suns, or entire clusters of suns called galaxies if the need arises.

I do not know if beings like me exist, with missions different from mine. I have never met any. Once, I tried to leave the universe to see what lies beyond. I couldn't. Something stopped me. I don't know exactly what it was but my strength waned as I neared the limits. I couldn't leave the universe I was designed for.

Time passed. Life emerged in cosmic oases, like here on Earth. I have interfered with most of them, but not for any specific purpose. I have time ahead of me and behind me. I don't know if I am tied to this universe till the end of it because there are things I do not know and, despite my strength compared to yours, I am finite.

If I sometimes keep you company and entertain you, it is because I feel alone. Circumstances chose you to become aware of my existence. But your lives are fleeting. Nature has preserved your genes—your traits—in a script only it can read and replicate, sowing you like seeds along the furrows of time. I have grown fond of you, frail mortal

creatures unable to leave the ground. I believe we will walk together for a long time, until the end of days.

The Steed of Time returns the Princess of Iol to her palace at the exact moment she left. Before departing, he confides in a gentle voice:

— I do, however, have a small problem with Lud and one of the Melena from the future. Their lives have been offset by the ripples of time. It will be difficult to correct without resorting to subterfuges that risk affecting their surroundings, for the threads of time are intertwined. Altering one thread inevitably impacts all those connected to it, potentially destroying the events they underpin.

*The players of time.*

Lud sets off with the Steed of Time toward the unknown and the mystery shrouding fabulous worlds. He soars over the deserts of Mars and its volcanic mountains. The reddish soil, carved with deep ravines, is strewn with hard, blackened stones. Wide, deep fissures scar the arid crust with long gashes. Numerous craters from meteorite impacts dot the vast, uneven expanses of this desolate world.

The Steed of Time changes form. He transforms into a diaphanous sphere, its outlines endlessly expanding until they become out of sight. He moves through space, propelled by tachyonic waves that can reverse time.

The void is not empty. It contains a latent, formidable energy known as vacuum energy or sometimes pre-matter—a potential reservoir that can trigger the spontaneous emergence of massive particles by raising the energy level at a point in space. Harnessing this energy is entirely possible with the right means.

Ulm, with his innate gifts, draws energy from this inexhaustible reservoir. He has dedicated a tiny fraction of his form to his guest's comfort, providing all amenities within a spacious, circular cabin-like appearance.

He glides over the asteroid belt orbiting between Mars and Jupiter. Rocks from the primordial nebula, hurtling through the void, have so far escaped the pull of neighboring planets and the central star called the sun.

While passing over Ceres, the dwarf planet, he detects an anomaly in the fabric of eons, in the direction of the Scorpio constellation, within a distant galaxy 12 billion light-years away. He focuses his thousands of senses in that direction. For ten minutes, he remains on alert, his exquisitely sensitive senses operating at full capacity, scanning space and time. They gather data with unparalleled precision.

A merciless war pitted two planets of a solar system located in one of the galaxy's arms, 15 light-years from the galactic center. One belligerent deployed fearsome weapons: time machines based on tachyon properties. Using this method, ten squadrons abruptly invaded their enemy's past, when they were defenseless, still in a growth stage, to launch devastating attacks. This criminal alteration of the past caused unpredictable damage to

both adversaries, whose temporal threads were intertwined.

The appearance of these aircraft in the past created a paradox of such magnitude that the linearity of time shattered. A temporal distortion involving both planets randomly projected entire segments of these celestial bodies into the past or future, isolating them in sealed temporal loops. The war ended. Entire patrols vanished from the sky, swept away by the ripples of time. Despite all attempts, none could return to their base or their era.

Ulm must intervene to ensure this does not recur. To do so, he must proceed step by step to untangle the loops and mend the threads of time. For him, the solution is simple: travel back in time, act before the creation of the diabolical machines, and prevent any possibility of their realization in the future.

Ulm's form is immaterial. There is no limit to his speed, but he requires energy for propulsion. However, the energy reservoir is within reach, and tachyonic waves carry him to his destination at superluminal speed.

Astounded, Lud watches the sky morph into a funnel spinning at a prodigious rate. The stars seem to cluster at

the funnel's mouth, forming a patch of myriad colors flowing like liquid paint along its walls toward the spout.

Incredulous, he addresses the Steed of Time:

— What's happening to the sky?

— We're moving at a colossal speed that will take us to the universe's edge. You have the chance to see unique sights. Take a comfortable seat, I'll widen your field of vision.

It is difficult to speak of travel time with Ulm, as he can return to the past or leap to the future. For Lud, a few hours pass in a sky compressed to the extreme, where galaxies blend into a mix of colors and lights before vanishing like gleaming spectral streaks.

Then the sky slowly regains its shape, but the stellar scenery has radically changed. Unknown stars occupy a space of intense blackness. Blue suns cast powerful light on the planets around them. Most are massive giants of hydrogen and helium. Some will soon ignite nuclear fusion in their massive cores, abruptly transforming into blazing stars.

— We are at the dawn of the universe's life, just over a billion years after its birth. Primordial gases like hydrogen

and helium haven't yet fully passed through the forges of stars to transform into elements like oxygen, calcium, or iron. Blue stars are the most massive. Their lifespans are brief compared to ordinary stars. From 10 million years, they begin to explode, becoming supernovae. But they've had time to synthesize new elements through fusion. Their matter is ejected across space at great speeds. So, even at this stage, relatively close to the great birth, we can expect to find many rocky planets, some capable of hosting life.

That's what draws us here. Civilizations that emerged six million years ago have managed to travel back in time, causing disruptions that backfired. They don't yet master all the techniques required for such a feat.

Now we'll survey the two planets in question. They've been battered by a distortion that projected their parts into different times. No contact remains between them. All activity has ceased. I must act quickly to prevent famine and war and bring both species to order. The inhabitants of these planets bear little resemblance to humans. You may be shocked, but you can choose not to look.

Those on the first planet, closest to that massive blue star you see in the center of your enlarged viewport, resemble spiders, but their heads are round and

voluminous. Their two hind limbs are sturdy enough to stand and move as bipeds. Their bodies are covered in dense black hairs. Their eyes are large and expressive : females have very light ones, while males' are darker.

The second planet, the one that concerns us most since it caused all the trouble, is the fifth from the blue star. The heat from that star reaches the tenth planet, on the system's edge near a dense Kuiper belt. This planet is inhabited by reptiles with smooth, cold skin streaked with pleasing blue and yellow patterns. But their gray eyes convey a cruelty hard to bear. Their four legs are frail but grant great agility. Females are slightly smaller than males, with marginally thicker bodies. Both species are oviparous, as mammals don't yet exist.

Ulm traverses the past. He watches scenes unfold, scrutinizing them intensely to choose the moment to intervene. Here, reptilian scientists have just completed their fatal weapon. There, they begin research under military oversight. He must go further back, before the discovery of tachyons.

Now, he must sever this entire sequence, erase the events leading to the current situation, and replace them with others to steer future research in radically different directions.

Ulm sets to work. The time machines vanish from the future. The mass transfer that caused the distortion can no longer occur. The loops unravel, and time regains its linearity.

The war is averted, as scientific research now follows other paths. Prosperous agricultural societies replace industrial sectors, which survive only in their agrarian form. All is restored. Ulm has succeeded in mending time and preventing future wars.

*Time.*

— What you see through your viewport isn't exactly what Earth's humans can see. This galaxy appears to them as it was twelve billion years ago, while you see it almost in the present. It no longer resembles what it was. The speed limit of massive bodies allows us to peer into the past. The light leaving here now will take twelve billion years to reach Earth. I'll mention, without delving into the details of such a perspective, that there's a similar way to glimpse the future. It's for humans to discover.

— But what is time, Ulm?

— It is, along with space, one of the universe's containers, yet even space can only contain something within time. You sometimes think time doesn't exist—an illusion, an emergent phenomenon, a manifestation of entropy, or some other physical quantity you can't identify. You also say space and time exist only because of matter and energy, which seem to generate their own containers, as if a fetus could create its womb and thus its own mother. This is simply because you can only perceive

these containers through the interactions and movements of the cosmic bodies they hold.

Absolute time is that of the universe as a single structure. Time is not gravity. It's the tools for measuring time that are influenced by gravity, giving the impression of slowing down. If there were only a multitude of local times at the expense of absolute time, it would be impossible to establish a global chronology for the universe's history, and this whole matter of events unfolding over 13.7 billion years would be meaningless, contradicting the principle of irreversibility. Local time is merely a perturbation in absolute time, like surface waves on an ocean. The wave is not the ocean.

Can change be conceived without invoking time? Can change exist outside time, or replace it? The notion of change inherently includes time, as it can only occur within time. Thus, time is not change and does not depend on it, whereas change depends on time, which it needs to manifest. Time is the framework of change, its matrix, its container, or its vector.

Is time the measure of change? But which specific change, since an infinity of changes occurs within a unit of time? Which one would represent time? Without change, would there be time? Humans can only perceive time

through changes affecting nature, objects, or themselves. But does this inability mean time doesn't exist autonomously? Is a watch time itself, or does it merely measure it? In absolute void, does time flow without change? If a watch were introduced? The change would be the movement of its hands. But is that movement time? If the watch were removed, would time cease to exist? Can a watch represent time?

Is time linear, quantum, or variable in its flow? When one person speaks to another on the moon, both exist in the same moment of absolute time, but the finite speed of transmission creates a temporal difference, giving the impression of local time and thus displaced times. If transmission speed were infinite, time would be the same for both—absolute. It's the limited speed of transmission that creates the illusion of local times. Thus, time seems to depend on the tool measuring it, but the speed of light cannot represent absolute time.

When it's said that the parameter 't' isn't needed for calculations, and thus time doesn't exist at the considered scale, it's the possibility of calculation that determines time's existence. It's like a blind person believing light doesn't exist because they can move.

Unless we assume an external parameter governs the creation of space based on a virtual world's needs, time and space are absolute. They exist beyond their contents, which cannot exist without them. Local times are mere perturbations of absolute time, just as matter is a perturbation of space. The present is the point of greatest potential in the time continuum, constantly emerging from it.

In the same way I tap the quantum void of space, I can dive into this continuum to raise a temporal crest by borrowing potential from upstream or downstream. From a point in the past or future, I can summon a present in which I can act.

— Fascinating, Ulm. Your mere presence convinces me of absolute time's existence. In other universes, if they exist, the speed of light might be greater or smaller, depending on the density of their respective quantum voids.

*An enchanted valley !*

— Now, I'll take you to a planet with a strange trait: its landscapes shift based on your imagination. But know that this change is unreal, subjective. You have nothing to fear. Simply dream, and your dream will come true as long as you sustain it. You can imagine any flowers you wish, even ones that speak or walk. You can talk to the wind, stones, streams, birds, or clouds. But refrain from touching them : they'd vanish at once.

From afar, the planet is cloaked in a layer of white clouds hiding the surface from the Terran's view. But with Ulm, there's no need to orbit, fear gravity, or endure the fiery atmospheric crossing. Such constraints don't apply to his immaterial form. Once the layer is breached, Lud glimpses a vast ocean, its light blue hue suggesting the shallow depth of the watery mass. A few lushly vegetated islands occasionally emerge amid this liquid expanse. But to the north, the Terran spots a hazy horizon crossed by a dark line, likely betraying a continent.

— Yes, it's a continent, Ulm confirms. And there, in a vast prairie covered with strange plants, you can dream. I

believe they exhale scents that trigger hallucinations based on what you imagine. But don't push your fantasies too far, you never know!

— I'll be cautious, Ulm. I'd love to see my poems transform into landscapes or refined colors, and my feelings become mystical roses.

An unforgettable experience. The poet's thoughts and emotions instantly alter the landscape, its curves and shimmering colors reflecting his state of mind like a giant kaleidoscope. The verses of his poems turn into silvery streams flowing peacefully through beds of purple and mauve, or into raging torrents cascading down slopes of dazzling white snowfields. His softest words, echoed infinitely by shifting hues, become drops of pearls and emeralds.

Lud is satisfied. He thanks Ulm for his generosity and devoted care.

Ulm locates the Milky Way to return. He extends his diffuse form to absorb latent energy, transforming it through his metabolism to make it usable. He detects space deformations around him and senses several black holes along his path.

In the cosmos, massive stars trap light. Scientists call them black holes. From the concept of escape velocity, which allows one to break free from a planet or star's pull depending on its mass, it's easy to imagine a celestial body whose escape velocity exceeds that of light.

Supermassive dark stars often lie at galaxy centers, ensuring their cohesion. But they don't serve only this purpose, as they play a key role in galaxy formation. Stellar black holes originate from a giant star that exploded as a supernova at the end of its short life, dispersing synthesized chemical elements into space for later formation of other celestial bodies.

Ulm does not fear black holes, but they harm his senses, disrupting time with their colossal masses and sharply curving the surrounding space. To approach or cross them, he must apply corrections to his parameters, which depend on the mass, curvature radius, and other factors known only to him.

While he can ensure his guest's safety in normal space-time conditions, he cannot guarantee it when those conditions reach extreme values, degenerating matter and energy and causing excessive distortions and deformations that could be fatal to a human.

*The drum.*

Melena of the wild ages rises early in the morning. She occupies a spacious hut of woven branches with her mother and younger brother, little Ghild. Gazelle and zebra hides, hung on stakes driven into the ground, form her personal wardrobe. Sandals of woven plant fibers protect her feet from sharp stones and thorns when she ventures beyond the clearing to gather edible plants and berries, dig roots, or spear fish in the pond. A carved tree branch serves as a fork to ward off reptiles and other small, harmful creatures.

She goes out to gather wild vegetables, edible plants, nuts, and ripe fruits. Two hours later, she returns, her arms laden with green plants and appetizing fruits. Large leaves have been woven into a vegetable basket where she's placed the fruits and nuts. She has also picked flowers to tie into her hair at her temples.

— Up, Ghild. Go wash in the stream and come back to eat.

— What did you bring?

— Fruits and succulent green stems.

Ghild leaves his bed of hides and dry grass, rubbing his eyes. He washes, then returns promptly to take his first meal of the day. Once sated, he goes off to play with children his age.

During her mother's absence, Melena tends to the "house." Not for long : she has a visitor. Ulm. He has resumed his form as a white steed, with a sleek, elegant bearing. Only his head, neck, chest, and forelegs emerge from the mist surrounding him. Melena is overjoyed to see him. His presence reassures and calms her.

She extends her smooth, silky white hand to stroke his straight muzzle and soft jowls, as tender as down. Then she rests her head on his neck, her long black hair mingling with the supple curls of his silvery mane.

She listens. A melody of sublime tenderness, with sounds colored by light, delicate shades repeated infinitely, caresses her enchanted ears and spellbound senses. A harmonious cascade splashes its mingled waters against the trembling walls of her moved heart, flooding it with sparkling foam. Melena swims in irresistible tenderness, plunging into the unfathomable abyss of extreme emotion. She loses all sense of reality.

She washes ashore on a mysterious beach with warm, damp sand. Fantastic trees with long emerald tresses rustle under a gentle, pure breeze. The sea stretches endlessly. Tiny birds with elusive colors and unheard-of songs follow her like the shadow of her sprightly step. Two marvelous finches join her with graceful flight, perching on her white shoulders. She heads toward the nearest grove, its broad leaves seeming to beckon like warm hands.

Melena succumbs to the ineffable charm of this fairy-like world. She sinks slowly onto the golden sand, but the Steed of Time catches her before her noble, troubled head rests on the magical ground.

Melena opens her eyes. The Steed is still there, unmoved, supporting her. The music has vanished, as has the beach.

Melena says to him: I must have dreamed. I dozed off on a distant beach whose name is hidden.

The drum resounds, its vibrant words swiftly spreading beyond the forest to friendly and enemy clans. Monkeys, hidden in the foliage of great trees, perk their ears and listen to the resounding drum. The lion in its lair,

the bird in its nest, the wild ass in its meadow, and the hare in its burrow nod and smile.

Melena and Lud, says the drum. Lud and Melena, echoes the half-sleeping forest.

Spring arrives to join the seven-day feast, clad in its garb of colors and greenery. It holds a large bouquet of flowers exuding the scent of eglantine and lavender.

The whispering wind in the branches tells the sweet finch the story of Melena, which it turns into a song.

*Melena, you move like a refined dove,  
Inaudible is the sound of your graceful step.  
Your voice is a sweet melody,  
On a distant beach whose name is hidden.  
Your eyes are jet-black, your face enchanted,  
Your hands are satiny, delicate, and refined.*

*The spacecraft.*

The Steed of Time does not meddle in human affairs. Only the integrity of the temporal fabric matters to him. Wars and misery do not concern him. He views them as natural, akin to stellar explosions or the curvature of space. Only his friends matter. He would surely intervene to save them from imminent peril, even if it meant involving humanity.

During its long journey around the galactic center, the sun crosses sectors of space that may harbor latent dangers for life on Earth. It may encounter asteroid swarms, remnants of dead stars, or interstellar gas clouds. For humans, space holds countless perils. Matter and energy are in constant evolution, interacting ceaselessly across vast distances. These interactions, which seem isolated and stretched across time and space to humans, are far quicker and closer on the universe's scale. Humanity's fleeting life places it on the margins of cosmic events due to its evolution on smaller space-time scales.

Ulm uses his senses to detect the cosmos's faintest vibrations. At times, he keeps them on standby for long

periods when he notices unusual fluctuations or uncertain echoes from unknown sources. During one such vigil, he intercepts faint echoes from outer space, close enough to put him on alert.

A body is moving toward the solar system, but its motion isn't due to gravity, as its bearing remains constant according to successive echoes detected by Ulm. This body seems to move with an autonomous motive force to maintain its trajectory.

A spacecraft?

But Ulm soon notices a second anomaly supporting his initial deduction. The object's velocity far exceeds the speed of light.

No body, regardless of its mass, can reach such speed solely through gravity. It must be an artifact, a product of artifice or a natural body transformed by extraordinary intelligence to travel through space and achieve objectives. But what objectives?

Superluminal speed interferes with time in some way. The time associated with objects can shift within the temporal fabric, creating irregularities and paradoxes. Ulm

cannot tolerate any interference that could damage time's integrity.

Ulm recalls Melena. She has not yet traveled through space and time to truly join his circle. This is his chance to remedy that. The Steed of Time isolates Melena's home. His splendid form partially materializes in the living room. Melena is alone. She seems delighted to see the Steed of Time again, whom she hasn't encountered in months.

— I've come to greet you, Melena, but mainly to let you live an unforgettable adventure, safe and without impacting your schedule, as I'll return you to the exact moment you left your home. This will let us spend time together, and you'll discover extraordinary things.

— I'd love to come with you, Steed of Time. You're an adorable being, and your presence comforts me.

The Steed of Time fashions a cabin for Melena within his immaterial form. He sets off to intercept the object moving through space without deviating or slowing. It's two light-months from Earth, but at its superluminal speed, it should reach it in less than seven days. Intercepting it is easy for Ulm. He must discern its intentions, origin, and motive force. There's only one way: approach it.

Ulm converses with Melena from the start. She trusts him blindly and feels no fear for her safety. She sees the sky darken suddenly, stars appearing like dazzling jewels.

— We're in space, Melena. Earth is behind us. We're venturing into the cosmic void to intercept a foreign body moving faster than light. It may pose a threat to Earth. We must confirm and take necessary measures. This will be your first feat.

Melena smiles at these words. What can I do against an unknown object from the abyss of nothingness, likely endowed with colossal powers? Ulm wants me to believe I'm not useless and that I'm helping manage the inconceivable.

— Sometimes, your presence alone can alter the course of events, Melena.

Ulm seems to read my thoughts. I wonder if he truly speaks or if it's an illusion.

— I can speak, Melena, but I can communicate otherwise when conditions, like here in space, aren't met. I refrain from reading your intimate thoughts or probing your secrets. That's of no use to me.

- You're wise, Ulm. How long have you lived?
- Over 13 billion years.
- So you're very old, Ulm.
- No, I don't age, for I am the son of time.

## VOÏX.

Ulm reaches the vicinity of the strange object. He discovers a luminous, ovoid body of considerable size for an artifact. His manifold senses encompass it, assessing its structures and identifying its systems and functions.

The craft is hollow. Living forms are inside. Number: 101. All in a state of stasis. Bipedes. Faceted eyes with sensors sensitive to ultraviolet and infrared.

Craft propulsion system: tachyon-based. Two flux generators.

Protective shield: extended repulsion field.

Armament: Disruptors. Disintegrators.

All systems are managed by a computer capable of initiative, data interpretation, deduction, and decision-making in case of crew incapacitation. Self-repairing. Isolated by an autonomous force field.

The spacecraft does not initiate deceleration at such a short distance from the solar system. It has an absolute braking system with a friction energy dissipator, but its destination could lie beyond the sun.

Ulm wants to access the onboard computer's database to trace the craft's origin, but intrusion risks alerting the machine. Though unable to detect him, it could notice access to its files and immediately signal a cyberattack. Its response might involve retaliation against Earth without warning, as it's the only planet in the system hosting life capable of such feats.

Ulm has other ways to trace the enigmatic craft's origin, the simplest being to follow its reverse trajectory through time while keeping it in sight. He could also track its signature via subtle space deformations caused by its movement. But Ulm avoids such methods for now. First, he must render the spacecraft harmless and force it to slow. The information gathered so far suffices for this.

Melena follows the events from her comfortable seat. Her eyes never leave the blazing craft, which seems motionless in the black velvet of space. Nothing surprises her anymore since the Steed of Time entered her life : an exceptional being of inestimable value, from another

dimension, endowed with cosmic powers, yet gentle and affable despite his formidable stature.

Now, Ulm thinks, we must deal with the craft. First action: neutralize its armament. Ulm identifies the components and encases each in a temporal loop, severing all communication between them.

The onboard computer detects an inexplicable anomaly. The red “armament unavailable” light flashes, though all module indicators are green. No failure anywhere, yet the weapon system is inoperative. What does this mean?

It issues an audible warning to the crew:

— Unknown danger. Weapon system inoperative. No failure detected.

The craft’s Commander receives the alarming message. Something is indeed amiss. Yet the space-scanning systems remain silent. It can’t be an external attack. The weapon system never fails—absolute reliability.

All components function, but not together. Strange!

— VOÏX, analyze the history. The exact moment of the anomaly.

The computer projects the history on a screen before the Commander. The red light flashed suddenly without valid reason. No system is faulty, but there's a communication breach. Caused by what ?

But the Commander's troubles are far from over. The faint vibration indicating the craft's thrusters are active vanishes abruptly. The speed drops so rapidly that the craft nearly disintegrates. A terrifying noise engulfs the vessel as the light barrier is crossed in reverse without following standard deceleration protocols.

VOÏX reacts late, engaging the braking system with delay. The craft can no longer maintain its trajectory. Multiple gravitational forces pull it in all directions before one prevails, drawing it toward a solar system planet. But at its current speed, it will take years to reach it, carrying space castaways.

Ulm refuses to be responsible for needless deaths. His mission is to safeguard time's integrity without interfering, as much as possible, with the destinies of the cosmos's many species.

— Melena, I'll project your hologram inside the craft. You'll tell its occupants their vessel is neutralized, but under certain conditions, their propulsion system could be reactivated. Their armament will remain inoperative until they destroy it themselves. That's one condition for restoring their motive force.

*The hologram.*

Melena's three-dimensional image materializes silently inside the stranded spacecraft, directly behind the control consoles in the cockpit. The astronauts turn around abruptly, sensing a presence at their backs. It takes them a moment to grasp the nature of the phenomenon.

The apparition stands a few centimeters above the floor. She smiles, but can the aliens comprehend the meaning of a smile? She raises her hands, palms facing these beings from another world, in a gesture of greeting and peace.

VOÏX intervenes:

— It's a hologram projected from outside the craft, but I can't identify or locate its source.

— At this point, that's not important. Let's first hear what this emissary has to convey. Activate the universal translator.

— Done, Commander.

— Bring in the specialists and scientists to witness the exchange.

— Immediately.

— Is the protective shield operational?

— Affirmative, Commander.

— Can you gradually increase its power? I want to see if it affects this hologram.

— Power level 3, 4, 5, 6... Maximum power. No change, Commander.

— This hologram is therefore immaterial. Its source likely is too. But what kind of immateriality are we dealing with?

— The craft might be the victim of temporal distortions, Commander. It's the only explanation I can offer without proof.

— Strange. The power holding us is beyond our grasp, despite our advanced technology. But you're probably right. Our weapons and propulsion system must have been shifted in time. They're now just spare parts stored in

separate hangars. I think we'd better listen to what it has to say.

At the Commander's signal, the universal translator activates under VOÏX's control. The Commander initiates the conversation.

— Who are you, space visitor?

— I am Melena, a woman from the planet Earth.

— The rocky planet orbiting third around that yellow star? It's the only one in the system that seems to harbor life.

— Exactly.

— We detected no space activity during our approach to the system. Do you represent Earth?

— No, Earth knows nothing of you!

— Then who sends you?

— The Inconceivable!

— Who is it? Being or machine?

— He doesn't want me to speak of it. Know only that his power rivals that of the cosmos itself. He doesn't wish to destroy you, but he has conditions for you to meet before deciding what follows.

— What are these conditions?

— They're very simple and thus within your reach.

First condition: destroy all onboard armament except that intended for the craft's defense and the astronauts' survival. Personal weapons and the magnetic shield should suffice for your survival. Aggressive weapons like disruptors and disintegrators must be destroyed before any agreement. Know that he prefers these negotiations, though they're unnecessary since you're already incapacitated. He could abandon you to your fate, and you'd soon be annihilated. Don't think he offers you a way out from weakness.

— So it's not a machine. Nor a material being, or we'd have detected it long ago.

— Second condition: except for the return journey, you must abandon tachyon propulsion, destroy all its generators, and the industry tied to it. If you accept these conditions, he'll allow you to temporarily regain control of your propulsion to return to your planet.

— But he'll follow us!

— He can find where you're from without that.

— Incredible!

— He can trace your path through space. He can follow tachyons and track your communication beams. He has many other ways to find your origin.

— So he's a temporal being. It's the only possibility, though it's hard for us to conceive. You were right, it's truly the Inconceivable. We must submit, as we have no other choice. It's our only remaining option. But I note we haven't used this armament or attacked any planet. The second condition depends on our superiors, not the craft's occupants, and our tachyon generators no longer function.

— Begin executing the first condition. Then you can contact your planet before returning home.

— But we no longer have access to the armament modules, which seem isolated in a different time from ours.

— He'll allow access to the modules one by one.

— We have no choice. Are you ready, VOÏX?

— I'm ready, Commander.

One by one, the components of the diabolical armament are destroyed. Their charred remains are jettisoned into space.

Melena's image vanishes instantly. Immediately, the tachyon generators for interstellar communication become operational.

VOÏX requests permission to contact the home planet. The Commander reluctantly agrees. He realizes the being holding them at its mercy will instantly locate the tachyon beam's destination, but can he oppose a power that manipulates time? He could order the craft's self-destruction to protect his planet, but he's convinced this ultimate sacrifice would be futile against a threat of this magnitude.

Long hours pass. Authorities debate fiercely in an extraordinary assembly gathering politicians, scientists, military leaders, magnates, and plebeian representatives. The situation is dire, according to reports from one of their Milky Way exploration crafts. An entity with unimaginable powers has seized, without firing a shot or

revealing itself, one of their mightiest vessels, the pinnacle of their civilization.

This nameless thing demands the dismantling of all war industries and advanced technology, threatening, if refused, to handle it itself and set their civilization back thousands of years.

— Can we trust this incredible information? Do we have means to verify its authenticity?

— A good question. We'll ask the craft to contact this entity to prove it can truly reach and harm us. Otherwise, the craft must self-destruct.

*The Volx planet.*

The spacecraft receives these instructions hours later but has no means to contact its undetectable enemy. How to proceed?

But Ulm avoids contact. He has intercepted their message and reviewed it. He expected this. Due to the immense distance, he cannot merely extend his form to reach the Volx planet. He must go there himself. This poses no issue for him. He will act one minute after the message is sent by its originators. That will give them something to ponder.

Ulm moves through space-time at a speed that defies imagination. Melena, awestruck, witnesses the sky transform into a funnel where galaxies merge into a chaotic swirl of colors, pouring like luminous paint along ebony walls.

— The sky has shrunk because we're traveling at tremendous speed to reach, as quickly as possible, the planet from which the spacecraft originates, which I'm also bringing along. This will be the final blow for these lovers of rhetoric.

In the spacecraft, the aliens are far from done with surprises. VOIX reports an uninitiated movement, without acceleration, at the staggering speed of 1,000 light-years per second.

Ten seconds suffice for Ulm to reach the rebellious planet. He locates the sites of war industries and diabolical weapons on the ground and in space. He executes three simultaneous actions: he travels back in time to appear one minute after the message's dispatch, encases the identified sites in temporal loops, and releases the spacecraft from his grasp.

The latter suddenly appears on radar screens. Devoid of initial velocity, it is helpless. The planet's abrupt gravity seizes it like a lasso, pulling it firmly toward the surface. This traction grants it enough speed to enter orbit rather than crash into the planet.

It immediately sends an S.O.S. to the spaceport control, providing its identifier and reporting propulsion system failure.

But Ulm is vigilant. He restores the thrusters to the present. VOIX instantly notices their availability. It activates the auxiliary engines, located in the same block

as the tachyon generators, and initiates landing procedures.

Minutes later, the spacecraft lands on the concrete-tiled runway and rolls to the parking area, where it comes to a stop. Ulm has kept his word, saving the astronauts from certain death.

The meeting continues at the government palace, awaiting the elusive entity's response, when suddenly the emergency communicator screen in front of the Commandeur emits a continuous beep, and a red message appears:

— The spacecraft 'Hurricane' landed at the spaceport two minutes ago. Its crew will immediately head to the palace where the extraordinary meeting is taking place. The craft and its occupants are unharmed.

The Commandeur cannot believe his eyes. He seeks confirmation. It must be another craft. He glances at the file under review. The word leaps out: Hurricane. Estimated current distance: 10,000 light-years!

The supreme leader is on the verge of losing his mind. He gasps. His eyes widen in shock. His body trembles from

the impact. His personal physician rushes over, administering a potent restorative.

The room falls silent. No one yet grasps the cause of this alarming distress. The Commandeur is renowned for his unyielding resilience. The leader slowly regains his composure. He finally manages to speak.

What he says is inconceivable. He must have lost his mind. Murmurs ripple through the room. Incredulous glances. It can only be a mistake. Such a thing is impossible!

But the crew arrives. They rush across the room and stop before the presidential table. Their faces are pale, their bodies weary. The Commander makes a “superhuman” effort to speak.

— We made the return journey in seconds, carried by an extraordinary force, undetectable but seemingly from the cosmos itself. It’s not a malevolent force, as it spared our lives. But it’s here, close, and it gives us a choice before acting. The decision is yours, Commandeur.

Melena’s three-dimensional image suddenly appears near the Commandeur’s table. Still reeling, this new disturbance causes him intense emotion.

Melena speaks, but it is Ulm's voice, as the room lacks a universal translator.

— All aggressive armaments—disruptors and disintegrators on the ground and in space are neutralized, as are all your tachyon-based systems. You have one month to destroy them and their related industries.

If you refuse, they will be destroyed regardless, your civilization will be set back millennia, and you will never regain such technological heights. The choice is yours. No living being will suffer from these restrictions, but know that the cosmos obeys laws none can violate without being brought to order.

This verdict is final.

*The universe.*

One month later, Ulm leaves the sector to return to Earth with Melena. The inhabitants of the Volx planet have learned their lesson. They now know they are not alone in the universe and that formidable forces watch and suppress any overreach that could cause instability harmful to the cosmos.

During the return journey, Ulm shows his guest exotic planets and fantastic celestial bodies. When she reenters her home, the Steed of Time lingers a moment before parting.

— I forgot to warn you, Melena. In negotiations, never let the opposing party take the lead in the discussion, as they'll try to steer it to pinpoint your weakness. Fortunately, I have no Achilles' heel and could interrupt you at any moment.

— Yes, I noticed. But since it was my first time, I didn't react right away.

She then asks him:

— Why don't you do anything about Earth's nuclear weapons?

— It's not without reason that nuclear technology was left within civilizations' reach, unlike other knowledge that sometimes remains unattainable. It's a test of viability. If humans rise to their assigned task by showing maturity, they'll destroy their nuclear arsenals themselves. Otherwise, they can only destroy themselves, proving their inability to integrate with the cosmos. So far, humans have only shown disregard for their own kind and the blessings nature has freely bestowed upon them.

Unfortunately, they're destroying their planet to amass vain riches. They may hope to live on Mars, which, no matter what they do, will never resemble Earth and will always remain hostile.

— Tell me about the universe, Ulm.

— The universe follows an arithmetic model. It resembles boxes of varying sizes nested within one another, much like sets of numbers, with each box corresponding to a scale.

It's not impossible to move from one scale to another, but it requires resolving successive infinities, akin to

mathematical limits that theoretically allow passage between dimensions.

With words, you try to express the universe, which is utterly unconcerned, as it speaks through phenomena, masses, energies, fields, and velocities. Can there be greater eloquence? Its language far surpasses your superficial, feeble terms. You seek to describe the universe, yet it describes itself in a way you can never match. The words you use in no way represent the things they denote.

The word 'sun' identifies the glowing orb that lights Earth but holds no detail about its nature, history, function, or interaction with other cosmic objects. Words are mere sounds evoking vague thoughts or fleeting images in your minds, unfaithful to the original. Thus, you resort to dictionaries, attempting to explain each term, often failing to grasp its core idea.

The universe is vast compared to humans but not so large to me. Perceiving an object's size depends closely on the observer's own dimensions and movement capabilities. The universe expands in the absolute void that draws and pulls it. Its peripheral speed exceeds that of light because the absolute void contains neither particles, quantum void, nor prematter to slow it, allowing unimaginable velocity.

Its expansion will cease only when matter has filled all available absolute void, like gas released in a balloon, uniformly distributed.

Black holes are a way to retain matter, shielding it from the absolute void's pull. Some may believe the absolute void doesn't or cannot exist. They're free to think so, but the absolute void I speak of surrounds the universe and is not part of it. It forms the matrix in which the universe expands, for if the universe grows, it does so relative to a pre-existing space. It cannot create its own container, which must precede it and be drawn from elsewhere.

Some of your scientists claim space doesn't exist, that it's an illusion. Others say space is discontinuous, made of entangled loops. I've also heard matter is a condensation of space.

Let me end with an example from your daily life. Suppose a video game features intelligent beings studying their environment. Time and space exist for them too. They might see their space as real, three-dimensional, or as a projection, an illusion born of their imagination. Others might argue they're all wrong, that space is created by the matter it contains or doesn't truly exist.

Yet a video game's matter consists of glowing pixels, beyond which lies a screen powered by another system and lit by electrons.

Beyond that, there's more, and more still, which the game's actors cannot conceive, as it lies outside their dimension, in realms inaccessible to them. In a video game, nothing truly exists but a program encoded on a medium, run by a machine.

*Laniakea.*

Days later, Ulm receives a flood of incoherent thoughts from Melena.

— Carried away... Whirlwind... Darkness... abyss...

Silence!

Ulm immediately surrounds his protégée's home. Nothing can escape, but he detects no trace of the young woman. His sharpened senses focus on the slightest vibration, the faintest emanation, the subtlest ripple in space and time. He finds no anomaly in the present.

He must go back in time, extract Melena from her environment, and await the phenomenon's manifestation.

To avoid interfering with the universe, Ulm doesn't act on absolute time. Ignorant of the intrusion's origin and nature, he simply delineates a one-minute radius circle centered on Melena's last message.

Ulm materializes in the living room before the young woman's anguished call. He sees her standing by a French window, gazing outside, seemingly admiring the scenery. Ulm swiftly pulls her from this vulnerable position, enveloping her in his immaterial form to shield her from matter's influence and the unknown aggressor before it invades the house.

Melena is surprised by this action, seeing no need for it, and to reassure her, Ulm explains the situation.

All senses alert, he waits. He suddenly detects a black dot rapidly expanding into a shadow that halts in the living room's center, unchanging in substance. It seems unaware of Ulm's presence. The apparition remains still for a moment, likely orienting itself within the house. It begins moving faster and faster, unhindered by obstacles like furniture or adjacent walls.

It's searching for something it can't find, Ulm thinks. He knows it seeks Melena, but for now, the shadow cannot reach her, as she's beyond its grasp, safe in another dimension.

Ulm directs all his senses—highly sensitive detectors—toward the shadow. A force field, a magnetic net, likely meant to envelop and ensnare its victim like a

vice. The entity hesitates, then vanishes abruptly, as if a distant operator switched off a projector.

Ulm tries to trace the object's path by following its faint markers. He detects another body, small and solid, moving away at superluminal speed. It soon blends with space's echoes. Its trajectory's end is unclear. Ulm pinpoints the interference's source at level four, or galactic, if Earth is level one. The intrusion originates from a galaxy cluster. He must determine why and take measures to protect Melena from future threats.

He moves through space, taking the young woman with him to keep her safe from another projection. In the past, he has dealt with galactics from the Laniakea and Shapley superclusters, and others within and beyond the observable universe.

Beings operating at these higher scales sometimes wield titanic powers, interfering with space-time and galactic objects. Some can divert supermassive black holes' colossal energies for their own ends or hurl entire galaxies off their orbits. Others have attained immeasurable wisdom.

Ulm wonders why a galactic would seek to seize a life form from a lower scale. Scientific curiosity? Galactic zoo?

Universal library? Temporary experiment, brief borrowing, or something else?

Ulm arrives in the space sector he pinpointed. No longer planets or stars, but galaxies. In the Laniakea supercluster, a hundred million galaxies form a cosmic mane, fluid and flowing, streaming at times over 600 kilometers per second toward the unfathomable abyss of the Great Attractor.

Ulm addresses Melena, explaining the situation. She no longer recalls nearly vanishing forever, torn from her environment by an enigmatic shadow, as that sequence never occurred for her.

Ulm moves farther into space to show Melena Laniakea's mane.

— It looks like blood vessels or magnified brain filaments.

— Indeed. Some of your scientists have used 'neurons' to describe this cosmic mane. The comparison is astute, but confirming it would require going further to discern the entire brain and the body shielding it. That might extend beyond this universe, which I cannot leave. Still, I

can use my telepathic abilities to detect any neuronal activity.

— Do it, Ulm. It's the chance!

Ulm falls silent, focusing on the mane. His senses detect countless flows along the galactic fibers. After several attempts, he catches a strange, confused thought form, utterly incomprehensible, without pinpointing its source. He captures other similar thoughts, equally devoid of meaning.

As a precaution, he transmits these thoughts to Melena, filtering them to lessen their psychological impact. She receives them clearly, but despite Ulm's measures, their intensity is nearly unbearable.

Sweat beads on her broad, pale forehead; her eyes widen under the tumultuous psychic waves' impact. For endless minutes, she bravely focuses on these senseless emanations before exclaiming, her voice strained with emotion:

— A fetus! These are the incoherent thoughts of an unformed fetus.

— Excellent assessment, Melena. It's likely a galactic being in the process of formation. Nature is fecund.

*Life in the universe.*

— But what do you know of life in the universe, Ulm?

— If life exists in the universe, it's because it's necessary to it or at least indifferent. The universe's initial predisposition to move from simple to complex through subtle transformations of its matter and energy has favored life's emergence. This tendency is itself enigmatic, implying an upstream cause, like a pre-set program imposing its properties on matter—or perhaps something else, like a 'will.'

What you see of the universe lies within one of those arithmetic sets I mentioned earlier, but at a lower scale. That's why space is so hostile to you. Other life forms exist in higher sets, operating in space without major constraints. They're unaware of your existence, just as you cannot perceive them. A virus cannot grasp a human's existence, as they operate at different scales. The virus functions at the cellular level but cannot go beyond to conceive of a higher being built from those same cells.

Humans, after centuries of trial and error, discovered this other life form at a smaller scale relative to their own, yet closer to initial life than they are. Indeed, humans are made of elements from this initial life, assembled and specialized through an ancestral consensus clearly obeying this general trend toward complexity.

— But have you encountered species at higher scales?

— Often. But as these sets are nested, they contain similar life forms, typically differing only in their respective scales. There are exceptions, though—distinct forms whose lifespans match those of stars or even galaxies. Your localized vision cannot grasp them; you see only the stars or galaxies composing them, like giant molecules. To appreciate their forms, you'd need to observe from far away.

I haven't yet encountered a life form at the universe's scale but once, when I tried to leave the cosmos, I had a confused sense of a higher life beyond, but I couldn't pinpoint it or assess its capabilities, as it lay beyond my senses, despite their aptitude for such tasks.

*The black ellipsoid.*

Ulm directs his senses toward the sector from which the module that nearly proved fatal to Melena originated. He operates this way because he is unaware of the intruder's nature and exact position, as the space involved at this level is vast.

During this operation, Melena falls asleep to recover her strength after the immense effort she has just exerted. Ulm shields her with his indestructible form. The danger is averted, certainly, but not definitively, as her aggressor might be tempted to strike again if given enough leeway.

Ulm now operates at a higher level, where unimaginable, powerful, and undetectable life forms with unpredictable reactions may manifest. Before falling asleep, Melena wonders where she would be now if Ulm hadn't received her message, if she had simply vanished. Could he have found her?

On reflection, Ulm could have gone back in time, further and further if needed, to retrieve her before her capture. She feels relieved. Thanks to Ulm, she too is unreachable!

While remaining vigilant, Ulm reflects. Only a highly advanced civilization could devise such a mode of transport. But what kind of civilization? There must have been a temporal reducer in this failed operation. Tachyons? Neutrinos? A localized stretching of space, also immaterial? A system bypassing prematter ? A bubble of absolute void? A psychic transfer? Some other undetermined method?

In his haste to save Melena, Ulm had neglected to gather critical data that could have shed light on the matter. Due to his ignorance of the event's circumstances, he had taken the simplest measure to address it: following the shadow's traces without analyzing them.

Ulm has two methods to rectify this: return to the start of the rescue operation or go back in time without moving, waiting for the launch of Melena's retrieval module to pinpoint its exact origin.

The signal came from the cluster, then reached the Milky Way and navigated to Earth. But could he detect it amid the colossal energetic turbulence spanning the entire electromagnetic spectrum? Filters could significantly reduce unwanted echoes, but he cannot eliminate them entirely without also obscuring the sought signal. Ulm has other methods in mind to solve the

problem. He decides to conduct multiple tests, simultaneously applying increasingly restrictive filters layered over time.

His efforts soon bear fruit. He suddenly spots a black ellipsoid crossing the cluster and leaping toward the Milky Way. A few minutes suffice to cover the immense distance separating the two celestial bodies.

Ulm focuses on the object's nature. It's the vector. His sensors lock onto their target and quickly identify it: an autonomous single-seat craft using a system to eliminate friction from space and the quantum void. The absolute void surrounds and propels it at limitless speed. It's the first time, despite his perennial existence, that he witnesses such a method. Unidentified entities have managed to bypass the speed limit imposed on matter by the universe.

Faced with such performance, Ulm opts for caution. Shift the entire region into the past, isolating it in a temporal loop? But isolating such a quantity of matter and energy could generate an unimaginable temporal paradox, irreparably affecting countless worlds' living species. No, Ulm thinks, there must be another way.

With the vector's issue resolved, he must now identify the source of these astonishing achievements. The ellipsoid will soon return to its origin. Thus, he must not lose it until it reaches its base. Ulm synchronizes his speed with its own. At an altitude of 50 kilometers, the ellipsoid slows and projects a shadow net toward Melena's house, reaching it in seconds. This is the force field meant to retrieve the victim. The ellipsoid soon resumes its flight toward the long-sought origin.

Ulm follows closely, but his presence is unlikely to be detected. Without its bubble-like appearance, barely distinguishable against space's backdrop like a faint vibration, even Ulm wouldn't have seen it.

Its creators couldn't imagine an immaterial being's existence, or they would surely have found a way to blend their bubble with space, making it imperceptible to his senses. For this reason, these entities must never suspect his existence.

*The planet of islands.*

The ellipsoid heads toward the Virgo Cluster, located at the heart of the Local Supercluster, which includes the Milky Way, the Andromeda Nebula, and roughly 10,000 other galaxies. It encompasses about a hundred clusters in total. Ulm estimates the module's trajectory passes through the elliptical galaxy M86 and its numerous globular clusters. A few minutes suffice for the bubble to reach its destination: a group of old, neighboring stars orbiting a neutron star with a 20-kilometer radius.

A failed black hole. It spins at a dizzying speed, and the pulsar's impulses reach Ulm every second. Detectable from afar, a belt-like spatial structure, made of countless spiked metallic rings, surrounds the neutron star at a safe distance to balance stability and efficiency. It resembles an incomplete Dyson sphere, Ulm thinks. A Type II or III civilization. Due to the ellipsoid and the force field, Ulm leans toward a Type III civilization, capable of harnessing the energy of multiple stars or even a galaxy.

To confirm, he examines the system's other celestial bodies and notes that two of them bear similar belts. Ulm

would prefer dealing with a planetary rather than a galactic life form. The latter implies mastery of highly advanced technology, facilitating the management and control of vast spaces. Any measures he might take could severely impact the planetary species there. Still, he's not yet certain of the civilization's type despite the observed spatial belts.

The ellipsoid, still under Ulm's vigilant and undetectable surveillance, heads toward a terrestrial planet orbiting a yellow sun at the system's periphery. That's where the mysterious manipulator must be.

A beautiful planet, slightly larger than Earth. A sea encircling the world surrounds thousands of islands, most hosting a single dwelling, the rest reserved for nature. Ulm counts 3,000 islands, 2,000 of which have identical single-story buildings. Splendid trees, arranged in evenly spaced columns, and beds of magnificent flowers and roses, grouped by shaded colors, adorn them.

On uninhabited islands, Ulm sees animals roaming freely, some lounging on beaches while others traverse green or wooded expanses. Each island hosts a unique species, except for birds, which can go anywhere due to their mobility.

Ulm pinpoints where the ellipsoid landed: an island like the others but with differently arranged infrastructure. Beyond the usual dwelling, a modest building stands at a 90-degree angle to it. A scientist or guardian, Ulm thinks, and the building is the laboratory from which they capture other life forms. To study them or place them on the islands?

This world is beautiful, Ulm reflects. Flying over the dwellings, he had glimpsed men and women resembling Earth's humans but even more beautiful. Their flawless features were pleasing to behold, differing only in skin color at times.

— Before acting, I must ensure this world isn't a zoo, that the scientist has no belligerent intentions, and that they don't belong to another life form. It would be a shame to harm this paradise.

He enters the building. It's indeed a laboratory, but Ulm prefers to approach the guardian first. Their nature will determine all other questions. He enters the dwelling. It's empty. No trace of an occupant for now. But Ulm notices the rooms lack furniture, paintings, cooking or cooling appliances, or leisure devices. Is the place uninhabited? He knows much remains to verify, but the

dwelling's emptiness naturally raises a question: Are the inhabitants permanent or temporary?

Easy for Ulm to find out. He could go back in time. For now, he prefers to visit the dwellings and hear the voices of the humanoids occupying them.

Ulm wakes Melena, still asleep, and briefs her on recent events. She seems intrigued by this enchanting world, especially its inhabitants, whom she'd like to see up close.

— No problem, Melena. I've analyzed this planet's atmosphere. It's barely different from Earth's and contains no germs harmful to you.

Ulm randomly selects an inhabited island. He scans it step by step. He detects no anomalies but notes the absence of transportation. No aircraft, vehicles, or even bicycles. No carts, wagons, or wheelbarrows either.

He enters the house. It's empty. Yet he hasn't encountered humanoids outside. The house is furnished, but essentials like bedding are missing. He simultaneously explores all other islands. No dwelling has bedding. Across a hundred islands, he detects no presence. Uninhabited, Ulm thinks, or their occupants have gone elsewhere.

On one island, a male and female walk side by side along flowerbeds. Ulm decides to approach and conduct an in-depth anatomical study. If he detects no danger, he might let Melena meet these enigmatic beings. He still hasn't answered the question of the missing bedding, one of the mysteries he must resolve before attempting contact through Melena.

Suddenly, surprising information reaches one of his senses. Two humanoids have just vanished from their island. Seconds later, two more follow. Within five minutes, 115 inhabitants disappear without using any transportation method known to Ulm.

He approaches the two humanoids. He has a theory about their vanishing but must be certain before discussing it with Melena, who might panic and refuse contact with these aliens. He begins his analysis and finds no major organ distinguishing them from Earth humans, except a well-developed gland between their shoulder blades. Blood vessels and nerves connect it to the spinal cord and brain.

Ulm wonders if it's linked to their mysterious vanishing ability. A personal teleporter, perhaps, the result of genetic acquisition or surgery. He can't be certain, as no trace of surgery remains.

Ulm probes their brains. Neural fluxes and confused thoughts reach him. Unsurprisingly, they're slightly telepathic. Their ability hasn't yet reached the level needed for clear thought transmission. Fear, anger, pain, joy—a basic telepathy he's observed in some animal species during his galactic travels. Still, it's enough to draw all island inhabitants' attention to an event causing fear, surprise, or emotion in one of them. Melena's sudden appearance could trigger such a reaction.

Ulm holds back. For now, he avoids reading their thoughts, as his intrusion into their privacy might alert them without their pinpointing the cause. He shares his findings with Melena to keep her informed.

— This planet seems to be a retreat for members of a species closely resembling humans. A temporary haven. Their home planet must be elsewhere, explaining the lack of bedding and sudden vanishings. Now, we must locate it among countless solar systems, but we can't do so blindly. The best way would be to track their movements. However, after their disappearance, I detected no vibrations or energy transfers to guide me. Their masses are negligible compared to the galaxy's matter, so I can't detect such subtle changes in another planet's mass caused by their sudden arrival at great distances.

*Kilta.*

— I'll go back in time, then. This planet's history will reveal where they come from, as they must have used traceable means to reach it.

The planet's history unfolds before Melena's eyes like a high-resolution color film. Ulm comments on the successive scenes.

Its formation barely differs from Earth's hypothesized origin. The gravitational collapse of a primordial nebula, made of gas, dust, and synthesized elements violently ejected by older stars, fosters the formation of denser celestial bodies that gradually attract surrounding matter over time. They grow larger, their masses increasing until they encompass much of the nebula.

These cores heat up due to intense contraction from the relentless accumulation of external matter, transforming into protostars. The nebula's remnants form planets and asteroids orbiting their main stars.

Due to their greater density, blocks, stones, and dust clump together near nascent stars. Their accretion continues through frequent collisions and the capture of countless aimless debris wandering in space. When their masses reach a certain threshold, these protoplanets can retain gas clouds to form atmospheres. Stars and planets thus clear their immediate surroundings, intercepting all stray matter encountered on their relentless orbital paths or nearby.

Gas planets form farther from the centers due to their lower density.

Ulm pauses his scientific discourse briefly before resuming for Melena.

— The planet we're interested in remained unoccupied for a long time, unable to initiate life despite its vast water reserves. Meanwhile, other worlds in the galaxy saw life emerge and develop rapidly.

At these words, Melena clearly discerns a dark vessel moving through space. She can't gauge its speed but notices bursts of stars crossing her field of vision like fireworks before fading into the background, swallowed by a black, gaping abyss.

She recalls the funnel-shaped sky and swarms of bright stars transformed by Ulm's extraordinary speed into a multicolored liquid painting flowing along the ebony walls of the void. That incredible scene has remained etched in her memory since the journey to the Volx planet.

— They seem as powerful as you, Ulm. This artifact moves at unimaginable speed.

— Rest assured, Melena. They can't be as powerful as me, as they need a vessel, whatever its nature, to move through space. What you see is another type of ellipsoid, much larger and better equipped. They've designed this vessel to travel and roam the cosmos. Yes, they're certainly strong, but not as much as me. I haven't yet studied the bubble closely to neutralize it if needed, but that will come soon, as they're within my reach. These cosmic wanderers will soon lead us, unknowingly, to their lair.

The space vessel approaches the planet at breakneck speed. It stops abruptly a hundred meters from the invisible Ulm and Melena, who constantly sees it through her viewport, as the Steed of Time shifts its perspective for this purpose.

Humanoids resembling the island inhabitants emerge from the shadow vessel. They wear sealed suits, masks,

oxygen tanks, and bags containing miniaturized devices and pouches for collecting samples.

They disperse in pairs across the island. Ulm fixes his senses on the space vessel and those remaining inside. He must know, as it's become a necessity, not just a duty. He analyzes the flood of incoming data. Ten minutes suffice to lift the veil on their mystery and uncover the key to the enigma.

Ulm breaks his silence to update Melena on his analysis.

— The space conquest by this humanoid species, who call themselves the 'FNQ,' meaning 'Those Who Know How to Live' in their language, has reached this point. They inhabit a planet in a galaxy at Laniakea's core. They come from far away, ghosts aboard ghost ships.

This vigorous, vital, and skilled race long ago completed the exploration of their solar system's planets and those of the nearest stars. They keep expanding, occasionally venturing into the Milky Way.

But how have 'Those Who Know How to Live' achieved these remarkable feats? Space Phoenicians, they've wrested tangible advantages from it to roam the cosmic

seas. Through deliberate genetic mutations, these beings can project themselves into space, though not beyond one parsec. They can remain there for three consecutive days. Beyond that, they must rematerialize on a planet of their choice, among those previously adapted to receive them within their reach.

The scene we've just witnessed dates back thousands of years. It corresponds to their first landing on this planet, named Kilta in their catalog. It will become a new transit point once they make it life-friendly by seeding it with microbes and cyanobacteria to fertilize its soil and adapt its atmosphere. Many planets have been adapted to serve as relays, enabling them to hop from one to another, going ever farther.

From their home planet, these relays form concentric circles, with circumferences no more than one parsec apart. Unadapted planets are unusable, as they cannot materialize there without risking death. That's why they need vessels to adapt them, and that's their weakness.

Ulm continues.

— I could neutralize them by sending them into the past, but would that serve the universe? A life reaching such a level can't be a mere chance. It's a deliberate,

intended outcome, though I don't know the cause or the will behind it. But the threat to you, Melena, remains real. They must be taught a lesson to know they're not all-powerful and that formidable, intelligent forces watch over the cosmos. Especially since, at this rate, they'll soon colonize every planet in the universe. But should they be stopped, and if so, how?

Ulm decides on a course of action. If "Those Who Know How to Live" respect life on other planets, preserving or integrating it, he'll turn a blind eye to their past expansion, provided they halt further advances and avoid Milky Way incursions. Otherwise, he'll find a way to render them harmless. That way, his conscience will be clear.

*Lina.*

Ulm has all the time he needs now that the vessel is within his detection range and cannot escape. But he realizes it's not the same for its occupants, who can dissolve into space at the slightest threat unless he traps them in a temporal loop. They'd be unable to escape, endlessly reliving the same events within its sealed boundaries.

Still, Ulm doesn't remain idle. He monitors both space and the planet, focusing particularly on the bipeds, whether those inside the vessel or those active on the island.

The former consult data from countless automated machines on the atmosphere, soil, and water's composition. The planet's characteristics are meticulously reviewed and scrutinized. A protocol, established millennia ago and leaving nothing to chance, is followed point by point.

Millions of data points are transmitted by machines and sensors to the onboard computers, which analyze

them and assign each a color: green, yellow, or red. Red-coded data must be addressed first on future visits, as they indicate latent dangers that could jeopardize the planned permanent settlement.

Life doesn't yet exist on Kilta, ruling out threats from living species, but the atmosphere and water require treatments to meet their standards.

Ulm doesn't linger on the planet long. The vessel's astronauts establish a hyperluminal encrypted communication to contact their home planet. Ulm instantly captures and tracks the beam effortlessly for two hours. Once he pinpoints its destination with the desired precision, he abandons the pursuit and heads at superior speed toward the planet of the space Phoenicians.

He crosses a cluster at Laniakea's core and moves toward one arm of a barred spiral galaxy. Melena sees clusters of bright stars streaming past her eyes without pause. Finally, the frenetic motion stops, and a planet, Earth's twin, halts before her as if to greet her.

White clouds, a blue ocean. Two continents—a crescent in the north and a star in the south, both straddling the equator—spread across the hemisphere facing her.

The young woman is delighted by this breathtaking sight.

— Are these continents artificial?

Ulm answers:

— No, they're natural. Only their shapes were reshaped to resemble what you see. This planet also has a moon like Earth's. For millions of years, the FNQ gazed at this figure, sometimes visible in the celestial ocean. They reproduced it on their planet's surface when they became capable.

This race is highly advanced. No satellites or electrical grids are visible. The atmosphere shows no trace of pollution. From here, I can see their cities. No streetlamp exceeds two meters. All single-story houses are identical, with the same amenities. There are no rich or poor. Three children per couple ensure the race's continuity. Their lifespan easily reaches 200 years. They form one people. Their homeland is the planet 'Lina.'

— On Earth, we're far from all this, Ulm.

— I could go forward in time and show you what will become of humanity.

— No, Ulm. I don't want to see that. If something terrible were to befall humanity, I couldn't bear it. It's our only hope. One day, humans will join hands and walk together toward the future. They, too, will learn to live.

Ulm falls silent. He says nothing to Melena, but he knows what will become of humanity.

He circles the planet to show Melena its other side. A single continent, shaped like an olive leaf, stretches laterally in the northern temperate zone, while a chain of sandy-beached islands sways under sea spray in the southern part.

Industrial facilities have long vanished from Lina. They've been relocated to other telluric planets in the system, one complex per site, to reduce pollution.

— Good initiatives, Ulm thinks. These beings are growing on me. It's time to visit the other planets occupied by 'Those Who Know How to Live.'

All relay planets are uninhabited. The FNQ avoid worlds hosting other species. The universe is vast, and their advanced technology gives them the freedom to choose, so they prefer not to disturb less-evolved neighbors. They even help them discreetly when needed,

protecting them from afar without hindering their progress or meddling in their affairs.

Ulm counts over two hundred relatively advanced species scattered across the galaxy. None have surpassed interplanetary travel.

Melena gazes curiously at these distant worlds and their mostly strange inhabitants—giant insects, thinking trees, birds speaking a charming language.

She sighs.

She recalls slaughtered animals, annihilated or enslaved peoples, endless wars, a polluted planet, humanity's future jeopardized by a handful's insatiable love for power and wealth. Fear of hunger, disease, aging, and death haunts humans. By amassing fortunes, they think they can escape their fate and defy death. They always succumb, leaving resources hoarded from others stacked in full but useless vaults, never used to ease others' suffering.

From time to time, men and women rise to say no to this way of life, but they're so few that their voices are soon silenced, their cries stifled.

And the disaster continues. A mutilated, ravaged planet, monstrous cities pushing nature ever farther, populations starving while others are dispossessed, oppressed, scattered, or killed.

*The FNQ.*

Ulm continues his examination of the space Phoenicians' situation. He finds no flaws in their relations with their galactic neighbors. Thus, he has no reason to harm them. They possess weapons for self-defense if needed, but they've never used them. A flawless race in every respect, except regarding Melena.

But Ulm has had time to form his opinion on this. To him, it's an isolated but highly significant case. The FNQ are numerous but not enough to colonize space as they wish. Humanoid races are rare in the cosmos, and those that exist aren't all sufficiently evolved to be assimilated.

"Those Who Know How to Live" were thrilled to discover Earth and its inhabitants but eventually realized that, without undergoing firm genetic mutations, humans, due to their instincts and selfish behaviors, were incapable of joining such a grand ambition. That's where Melena comes in.

But why Melena?

Only Ulm knows. He might reveal it one day.

Ulm briefs Melena on his findings without mentioning his final reflection. He tells her of his decision not to act against them, as weakening them could open the cosmos to less peaceful species. It would be terrible if life in the universe suddenly fell prey to morally imperfect races. But that won't happen as long as Ulm stands watch.

— Melena, you'll visit them and explain that they must leave you alone in the future. They'll be astonished to see you appear suddenly in their world, coming from so far without any apparent means of transport. They'll ask many questions but find no satisfactory answers.

You'll emerge among them as they do when returning from space. But they only do so in regulated areas, fearing sudden appearances in crowds, on rooftops, or elsewhere. They'll connect the two methods, but since the distance you've crossed far exceeds what they can manage, they'll fear you, respect you, and listen.

Not a word about me. Ignore questions that unsettle you or those about your supposed journey. I'll be there to help. Make them believe you belong to a vast, powerful community. Demand that the Milky Way remain off-limits to their ambitions and incursions—a forbidden zone. Your power will stun them into submission. They'll eventually yield.

Melena materializes in the center of the busiest plaza in Lina's main city. Her appearance amid the crowd sparks panic and outrage. Shouts and threats erupt. But her strange attire soon calms them. Suddenly, silence falls. They realize this female cannot be one of theirs. Stunned faces stare at her, incredulous. The nearest step back quickly. The silent crowd surrounds her at a respectful distance, ready to vanish at the slightest hint of aggression.

Melena raises her arm, palm outward. She turns slowly so all can see her gesture. Then she lowers her arm and addresses the crowd through Ulm, the invisible one nearby. He envelops the plaza and the crowd.

— I am Melena. I come from Earth. I wish to speak to your leaders.

Most don't know Earth, its location, or if it even exists. Had they known, they might have fled in droves.

The FNQ confer among themselves.

— Leaders? She must mean the three most important committees: Planetary Internal Affairs, External Affairs, and Space Exploration.

— Yes, exactly, and I'd like everyone to hear what I have to say. No need to go elsewhere; this place is perfect for a plenary meeting.

*The deal.*

Half an hour suffices to gather the committee members, who, urgently summoned, rush over without even changing, so grave the matter seems.

They gaze at the woman standing amid the crowd. Among them are two renowned geneticists, the very ones who planned Melena's capture. They possess a wealth of physical and genetic data about her. They recognize her features, their eyes widening in shock.

— This woman, about whom we compiled an extensive dossier, is a prime candidate for our human genetic mutation project. But she could never cross such a vast distance on her own. Impossible for a race still at the first stage of space conquest. Unless she's a doppelgänger from another world, an implausible, highly unlikely assumption. Especially since she claims to be Melena from Earth.

There must be an invisible actor who helped her achieve this inconceivable feat. But what actor could accomplish such a deed? A galactic? A civilization more advanced than ours? But why her, specifically?

Melena speaks:

— A small vessel from your world tried to abduct me for reasons I don't know. I've come from far away to ask you to cease such actions. I'm not an isolated case, as you might be tempted to believe. I belong to a community that has mastered space travel for ages, with no distance restrictions. To prevent this from happening again, the entire Milky Way is now off-limits to you.

A committee member reacts to her last words:

— And how do you plan to enforce this ban? With words or wishes?"

— This entire planet is under control. Nothing can leave it anymore.

The FNQ exchange long glances.

What does she mean? They're afraid to understand. They turn to individuals standing apart.

— Jump to space!

Those addressed raise their arms skyward, taking a deep breath. This is how they trigger dematerialization.

Nothing happens. After several attempts, they give up, dismayed. They turn to the committee members.

— We can't jump into space. Our ability has completely vanished.

All address Melena:

— How did you achieve this astounding result?

— I've projected the relevant organs into time. As they're not vital, their absence won't harm you, but you can't activate them. I can keep them out of your reach indefinitely, halting your space conquest instantly. I'm telling you this to deter you from using other means, which would meet the same fate at the slightest attempt to breach the blockade.

I ask you to assess the situation correctly and make the necessary decisions. Know that this is only the beginning. If you refuse to cooperate, harsher measures will be taken against you.

“Those Who Know How to Live” confer. They can neither grasp the threat's true nature nor determine its source, whether it's within their reach, or if they can

confront it with their now-limited means. But they quickly realize the conditions imposed by this occult power aren't as draconian as they first seem. The Milky Way is just one galaxy among billions in the universe. They have no relay planets there. Abandoning it won't harm them.

Yes, but there's also Earth and its humans, who, under certain conditions, could provide significant support for their space odyssey.

They must negotiate!

— Melena, we don't need the entire Milky Way. We only need Earth, particularly its humans. They're the only beings we've found who can help us fulfill our cosmic task. We're too few to continue this vast project alone. We request permission to apply genetic mutations like ours to samples, then reintegrate them into their societies. In a few centuries, humanity will reach our level, becoming a peaceful race capable of joining us in the universe's conquest.

— I see no objection. Your civilization is precious and useful to the universe. Humans will be thrilled to participate.

— Then welcome, for the duration of your stay among us.

The crowd disperses. Melena is immediately taken in by an FNQ family. Ulm doesn't leave her side. He checks her food and watches over her when she sleeps or goes out.

Melena is delighted. These charming, kind, and attentive people differ little from Earth's, except they seem to know neither anger nor selfishness.

As an honored guest, she travels the galaxy aboard one of their ebony vessels, visiting exotic worlds. For a month, she hops from planet to planet, admiring fantastic landscapes.

Finally, Melena returns to her home on Earth.

*The next drum!*

— Melena, before I leave, I'd like to ask you a question.

— Yes, Ulm.

— Why don't you like Lud?

— He's old.

— But you're the one who attracted him at first.

— No, he misunderstood. It was just kindness.

— Lud is a diarist. He recorded everything in his journal to remember it all. And you know I can go back in time.

Melena hesitates. She turns her back to Ulm, answering in a faint voice.

— At first, he seemed different, but then I changed my mind.

She turns to face Ulm again. She can't hold back a cry of surprise that turns into a plaintive whimper. Lud stands where Ulm was moments ago, as Ulm has vanished.

But this isn't the Lud she knows, as the man smiling at her looks much younger, barely 25. The next moment is even more distressing for her already frayed nerves. When he speaks, it's Ulm's musical voice she hears, not Lud's hoarse one.

Her shock is so intense, so sudden, that the walls spin faster and faster around her. Eyes bulging, mouth agape in a silent scream, she feels her strength fade. Her fall seems endless, as if from a steep cliff, but Lud steps forward and extends his arms to keep her from hitting the hard floor.

Despite her slenderness, Melena is heavy, but he holds her firmly without apparent effort. Is this truly Lud?

Moments later, Melena emerges from her faint. She opens her eyes and sees Lud close by, holding her under her arms. She tries to push him away with all her strength, but Lud doesn't budge, merely withdrawing his hands.

— Who are you? You're not Lud.

— Yes, I am Lud, but I'm also Ulm.

— How is that possible?

— Many things you can't even imagine are possible for Ulm. Look, Melena.

Ulm resumes his Steed of Time form, and simultaneously, five human projections appear in the living room.

— I present Melena 1, Melena 2, Lud 1, Lud 2, and Lud 3. And you are Melena 3.

— I know Melena 2 and Lud 3, but not the others.

— It's a long story. I'll tell it in detail since you're all gathered here. The other two Melenas know part of it, as does Lud 3, but the rest know nothing.

Ulm begins his extraordinary tale:

— I've known Earth since its formation. Its privileged position relative to the sun makes it suited to harbor life. With my innate abilities, I can travel through time and know any planet's past and future. I witnessed humanity's birth. As humans spread across the globe, occupying more space and organizing,

I had the idea to inject some of my parameters into the genetic makeup of two females from a viable emerging group.

These parameters included a position indicator, mutual recognition ability, distinctive physical and personality traits, and latent powers like foreseeing the near future, traveling with me through time and space, or contacting me in extreme anxiety or heightened emotion.

This genetic manipulation was to manifest every 3,000 years, producing simultaneous male and female replicas. That's how you were born.

Unfortunately, the last replica went awry due to a genetic mutation that delayed Melena's birth, creating a temporary block. This greatly disrupted my initiative. I can't fix it without altering Melena's or Lud's lineage. Still, I intend to correct the mutation's effects to prevent interference with future replicas' simultaneity.

Now that you're all informed, the current male and female replicas can no longer ensure the operation's continuity due to Melena's rejection.

Melena speaks:

— I'm ready to change my mind and attitude to avoid disrupting this operation, Ulm. Because of you, and a bit because of Lud, who, despite his age, isn't indifferent to me. He's been kind and attentive, but I always pushed him away because he's not from my generation.

— What do you say, Lud?

— It depends on you, Ulm. Bring me back in time when needed. That way, Melena won't have to endure this time gap constantly. On the engagement day, the wedding day, the honeymoon, and others. Do you agree?

— I'm here to help you be happy.

All the Melenas and Luds from past and future applaud the happy resolution.

Ulm is satisfied !

A sublime melody, seemingly from the Cosmos itself, fills the minds of these men and women united across time's eras.

*What joy to find your innocent face again,  
Your sweetness scented with spring's fragrances,  
Your hues of tenderness and resurgent hope,*

*Your dizzying bliss and ceaseless dreams.*

The end.





This is a science fiction story that also includes reflections on the universe, time, and space. Part of it is dedicated to prehistory, as the story begins in those distant times of the past and ends in the present. An enigmatic creature operating on a cosmic scale takes an interest in two human beings, a male and a female, who reproduce at regular intervals as identical copies. For what purpose? That's what the reader will discover by following the fascinating adventures of Ulm, *The Steed of Time*.